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Cloven-Hoof,

THE BUFFALO DEMON;

OR, THE BORDER VULTURES.

A TALE OF THE SOUTHWEST.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK," "THE DOUBLE DAG-
GERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

FOUND IN THE MARSH—THE LOCKET.

"JACK BULARD! Jack Bulard; d'ye hear me? Come here, I tell ye!"

"What's wantin', Peggy?" came in slow accents from within.

Mrs. Bulard, a buxom little woman of five-and-twenty years, looked up from her wash-tub beside the cabin door, with a savage frown.

"Ye'd better git a-comin', Jack, now, I tell ye, or I'll come in there, and club the mop-stick over your thick skull, see? I don't. I want ye!"

"Yas, ye're allus wantin' me, Peggy, w'en I git sot down for a comfortable smoke," growled a great strapping fellow, of some ten years the woman's senior, as he lumbered along toward the door, pipe in hand. "W'at's the rumpus, gal?"

Peggy stopped in her work, and faced her spouse, excitedly.

"Ye remember that clatter of hoofs we heerd at midnight, last night, don't ye, Jack, after we were in bed?"

"Consarn me, ef I don't! I tho't that the Demon Buffalo, w'at ther fellers ar' tellin' such almighty yarns about, war broke his tether-strings!"

"Yes!" snapped Peggy, maliciously, "an ye war scar't nigh about inter fits. Ye hugged cluss up to me, as like I war goin' to purtect ye!"

"No sich a thing," growled Jack. "But w'at of the clatter of hoofs?"

"A good deal, I s'pect," nodded Peggy, knowingly. "Thar's som'thin' wrong, Jack—Listen! d'ye hear that?"

Jack bent his muleish-looking ears forward, and was silent.

Presently a peculiar sound greeted his hearing—a sound singular, indeed, out there on the prairies.

It was a piteous moan or cry, such as could be emitted by only a baby, in distress.

"Humph!" muttered the squatter, "a painter's screech, I judge."

"No, it tain't nuther, I tell ye!" vociferated Peggy. "It ar' a baby's cry!"

"Blarst the babbies!" grunted Jack, taking a good long puff at his pipe. "Ye run to 'em, woman. Since ye got hitched up alongside o' me, I've heerd nothin' but babbies, babbies, babbies! Ye've preached on 'em from mornin' till nite!"

"And that's all the good it's done!" spat forth the better-

half. "Ye orter be ashamed on yerself, Jack Bulard. Here we've bin j'ined these two year, an' not a chick—"

At this instant the long, peculiar cry greeted their hearing again.

"Whar's it cum from?" muttered Jack, listening intently. "Frum the bog over yander, eh, gal?"

"On course," coincided Peggy. "Jes' ye go over an' see, Jack. Ef it's a baby, mind you, bring the little tootsy-bootsy to my arms; the poor humless little cherub!"

"Ya-al! I'll tootsy-bootsy it," drawled he, as he turned into the cabin for his rifle. "Like's not I'll heave it over inter 'Soury, ef it's a babbie."

"Now, jes' le'me see ye try it, Jack Bulard! Ef ye want me ter wear this hickory mop-stick out over your he'd, go and chuck et inter the Missessuri. There'll be one less Injin-fighter, I tell ye!"

"Humph!" muttered Jack, eying the aforesaid weapon of offense, contemptuously. "Thet cudgel hain't got ther terrors ter me thet it uster have, Peggy. My head knows thet ar stick by heart, an' I'll bet a chaw of terbacker thet this 'ere same skull o'

mine ken stan' more mop-stick drummin' than ye've got wind ter inflickt. No, gal; ye'll hev ter cut a hevyer gad'n that!"

Peggy uttered a screech that would have rivaled the panther, and made a precipitous dive for the cudgel, but her amiable spouse was out of reach ere she could possess herself of it.

Across the prairie from Bulard's cabin, at the distance of a couple of hundred yards, was an immense flag-bog or marsh, which ran back to the edge of the Missouri river.

At this, the spring season of the year, it was generally about half-filled with water and driftwood, and there were treacherous sinks and sloughs, here and there, that made it very dangerous to cross, if not quite inaccessible.

Jack Bulard had been reared from infancy on the border, and was as good a scout, trapper, and Indian-fighter, as the district boasted of.

Therefore, when he left the cabin behind him, he did not strike out boldly in the direction whence came the frequent cries, but turned abruptly to the north and hurried off.

He was ever alert to the tricks and snares instigated by the wily savages, and even in his own cabin, he kept a watchful eye out upon any surrounding object that was in the least suspicious.

At the present time he was by no means thrown off his guard.

He knew that there were none of the panther species of animals in the bog; but he did not know how many of the red-skin species might be lurking in it, trying to lure him within gun-shot, by the art of simulation which seems so natural among the bloodthirsty denizens of the West.

So he approached by a circuitous route, and with the greatest caution.

Fully fifteen minutes had elapsed, so carefully did he sneak along, ere he disappeared in the wilderness of flags.

"The big idiot," observed Peggy, who had been watching him, contemptuously. "He's afeared et's a red-skin. Bah! no Injin ever made sich cries as them. It's a baby, an' that's the long an' short of it. Hum, well; I s'pose there's no use frettin' 'bout him. He will hev his own way. I do believe he'd use jest so much caution ef he were goin' ter a funeral!"

Once in among the rustling brakes and flags, Jack Bulard exercised even more stealth than before. On his hands and knees he moved toward the object of his search, parting the thicket as he went.

For a hundred yards he crept forward; then stopped and listened.

Not a sound was to be heard save the sullen roar of the great river off to the west, and the rustle of the flags above and around him.

"Gol-darn the babbies, anyhow," he forcibly ejaculated, as one of his hands and arms sunk to the shoulder in a leaf-concealed pool of mud.

Hardly had he spoken, when a piteous cry broke out, in a thicket just in front of him.

To creep forward and part the brakes was but the work



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of an instant, and as he did so, the great borderer started aghast with an exclamation of horror.

There, directly before him, was a pool of clear, crystal water, completely hedged in by the surrounding forest of firs.

Lying just on the edge of this pool, with its feet and little limbs submerged in the water, was a child—a mere infant in years, dressed in a baby's dress, which had once been white, but was now muddy, soiled and torn.

Jack Bulard's face was white with an awful feeling of terror, as he pulled the little sufferer from the cold water.

It was not dead yet, but he could see by the short, quick gasps for breath, that it could not have held out much longer. The little white face, the staring blue eyes, and the deathly hue about the little mouth, told him that in an hour more the poor thing would have been dead.

It was evidently a girl, for its hair was long and sunny.

"Horrible!" muttered the big-hearted borderer, tears standing in his eyes as he took the moaning object of pity upon his knee. "Ther man er 'ooman, thet c'uld hev ther stummack to ailing such a purty critter inter this hole ain't no better nor than ar' a lizard. Eh, leetle 'un, w'at is it?"

The waif continued to cry in a manner piteous to see, and its delicate white hand kept pointing toward the pool, as if to attract the hunter's attention to something buried beneath its placid depths.

At first, Bulard did not comprehend, clearly; then something akin to combined horror and dread attacked him, and laying the child upon the ground, he stepped forward, waded a few steps into the pool and peered down into the crystal water.

His great form shook with emotion, and his eyes bulged from their sockets, as he made a second discovery.

There, lying upon its back on the white, pebbly bottom, was another infant!

It was dressed like the first, and of the same size. Very likely the two were twins.

Awful! aye, horrified beyond expression, the borderer reached forward his foot, and stirred the body. Then he perceived that it was held down by weights, attached to its waist by strings.

After a moment, he staggered back to the shore, and seating himself by the side of the little girl, he bowed his face forward between his hands, and the tears fell from his eyes thick and fast.

Never before in his life, thus far, had his feelings been so touched.

Never had he stumbled upon a scene that so shocked his nerves, and opened the valves to the pity in his great heart.

It was some time ere he could command his control over the tempest of emotion enough to raise the living child in his arms, and bear her toward his cabin.

Here he gave her up to Peggy, as, in his rude but honest manner, he related what he had seen.

Peggy Bulard, though she had a long tongue, was the possessor of a large and kindly heart, and she received the little waif with true motherly affection, and left the wash-tub to nurse her back to life—which was an uncommon thing for Peggy.

Sad and sorrowful, Jack went back to the pool and fished out the body of the dead child, which he also bore to his cabin home.

Peggy laid it out in a white sheet, while out of doors Jack set to work, and out of a pine slab manufactured a rude coffin.

On the neck of the dead waif was found a strange scar—a birth-mark, doubtless, in the shape of a tiny hand. All the fingers and the imprint of the palm of the hand being quite distinct.

Also, around the neck of the little girl was a gold chain, to which was attached by a coral link a little locket set with precious stones.

"Peggy," said the borderer, that evening, as he sat tipped back in a favorite corner of the cabin, waiting for her to prepare the evening meal, "d'ye know w'at I feel in my bones?"

"How shed I know?" snapped she. "You're allus feelin' som'thin' in 'em; but I feel never cums true!"

"Don't, eh? When I felt it in my bones thet ther Injuns war goin' ter burn out Shaeffer's, they didn't do it, did they? Oh, my gal, my bones are true as 'allmanax in their prophecys, sure pop! I feel it in 'em, jest at this purty-lar minnit, that some day or other, I shall run slap up against ther human that deserted these poor children."

"I hope to gracious ye will, Jack Bulard," replied Peggy, giving the hasty-pudding a vigorous stir, "an' ef ye don't bu'st his pate for him, I hope he'll bu'st yourn."

"Oh, I'll bu'st him, never ye fear! But, what're ye goin' to do w' ther leetle girl, ef she don't go over ther dam?"

"Raise her, on course!"

"Thet's right, gal—right as a coky nut. An' w'ile ye'er raisin' her, I'll keep my eye peeled erbout, arter the ens who hain't got no more ov a heart than a alligator."

The next morning the body of the little dead one was interred by rude but tender hands.

CHAPTER II.

JONATHAN JERROLD, ARTIST.

SEVENTEEN years later.

A company of about a dozen horsemen was riding leisurely across the great plains, at the close of what had been a sultry August day. All were mounted on spirited horses, and their dress plainly denoted their calling—that of the free ranger of the border.

The main party was headed by two men, who, evidently, were chief in command.

The one was a tall, muscular knight of the frontier,

dressed in buck-skin, with a face tanned to a nut-brown hue from constant exposure to wind and sun; piercing gray eyes, dark curling hair, and a heavy brigandish mustache of a like color. His form was of perfect mold, and he sat his horse like a cavalier of old.

His companion, who rode by his side, was a sturdy, grim-faced young borderer, with a lithe yet muscular form, black eyes, and long dark hair, that fell around his shoulders in profusion, while his face was shorn of all signs of beard. Both of the leaders, as well, in fact, as the whole of the cavalcade, were well armed.

"You're sure you can sight the cabin, ere darkness falls, Life?" asked he of the mustache, with an uneasy glance toward the dry red sun, which was dropping behind the horizon. "You are aware that we are now in the country of the Apache, and I am not too favorably impressed with the character of either the red or white inhabitants of the district we are about to enter; or, that is, I would not care to camp down on the plains here with this handful of men!"

"You talk like a hornet, captain!" said Life, dryly; "but never fear. 'Less suthin' stranger'n I kno' of hes happened, I'll show ye Jack Bulard's cabin afore the moon's up. How's yer compass p'int now? 'Bout sow'-est, ain't et?"

"Yes," replied the captain, consulting the hands of the compass—"about that. A little to the south, if anything."

"Thort so. Ken't ginnerally fool the Leopard on his reckoning. Wal, sich beln the case, I opine ye'll see that gal o' yer's in short order. Luv her purty strong, don't ye, boss?"

Captain Chris Adams flushed, but it was a flush of pride and pleasure that shot athwart his visage.

"Yes," he replied, thoughtfully—"I love her passionately—madly. She is a pure and beautiful maiden, Life!"

"Right, capten, sure's I'm a buffer-steak anihilater. I've kno'n Guess Bulard these ten year, and 'll go my last pluf o' terbacker she 'll make a thumpin' good wife. How'd ye ever happen to meet her?"

"I'll tell you," responded the captain, as he gave another anxious glance toward the setting sun. "You remember the big freshet there was on the Missouri, before Bulard moved down here to Texas, don't you? Well, I was scoutin' among the reds on the other side of the river, when that mighty thav came, about ten miles below Bulard's cabin."

"One drizzling, nasty morning, when the prairies were nothing more nor less than an ocean of water, a band of Sioux got after me, and I was compelled to 'light out' for the stream. I knew of a canoe hidden near the shore, and rather than risk my hair in the keeping of old Nemostoka, I resolved to risk a trip across the river to the other shore."

"I got in sight of the river about ten minutes ahead of the reds, and uncovering my canoe, I sprung in, and pushed out. Life, if you've ever seen the Missouri on one of her tantrums, you can imagine something about how it was then. It was a boiling, seething expanse of turbulent water, the raging waves each wrangling with the other to get ahead, but, in one sense of the word, none succeeding."

"My frail bark tossed and lurched, and plunged, in the battle, like a stick, and I was not able to do much service with the paddle."

"At last I was about in the middle of the original river course, and then made a startling discovery."

"Coming down the stream, and bearing direct toward me, was a cabin—yes, a log cabin, sir, which danced along like a ship upon the ocean, its heavy weight being a means of keeping it intact and from tipping over. Upon the roof, with their arms outstretched toward me in a supplicating manner, were three persons."

"From the instant of this discovery I resolved to save them, if possible, for I knew that Locust Island was not a half a dozen miles below, and that there the cabin would be dashed against the tree-tops, and those on the roof would perish in the flood."

"I so managed my canoe that in a short time my craft and the cabin were dashing along, side by side."

"By the assistance of my lariat, I soon had the three prisoners in my frail craft, and after an hour of doubt and uncertainty, we reached dry land."

"The rescued ones were Jack Bulard, his wife and his lovely young daughter. The freshet had swept away their cabin while they were yet in bed, and by the opportune dismantling of the chimney, they had succeeded in escaping to the roof."

"That was a memorable occasion, Life. I took them along with me, down to Dallas, and fell in love with Guessie Bulard, in the bargain. Just a year ago, when we separated, on the occasion of my call up into Montana, she promised to wait for me, and on my return, become my wife."

"You order be a joyous skunk, boss," said the Leopard, solemnly. "But, by my steak-eating proclivities, look ther! W'at in the name of the forty-seven constellations o' stars, d'uz thet mean?"

Captain Chris gave the signal and every man drew rein, at once.

Directly in front of them, though distant several hundred yards from where they had halted, stood a horse and wagon—the former, an old, scrawny, ribby sorrel, who looked as if it had never known the taste of hay or grain, while the latter was a small, rickety specimen of the canvas-covered "schooner," used by wagon trains in crossing the prairies.

Between this strange conveyance and the cavalcade, was a man, whose frantic hopping about, and grotesque motions first to his wagon, and then toward our friends, was intended, evidently, to warn them not to approach.

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"Hold on a bit!" ordered Captain Chris, "and let's see what that lunatic means!"

The whole cavalcade pulled up abreast, and stared at the stranger.

As soon as he perceived that he had succeeded in bringing them to a halt, he skurried quickly back to the hind end of his vehicle, and took therefrom a box not unlike a camera or photograph apparatus, which was attached to a tripod, or high three-legged stool. This he stood upon the ground, with the nose pointed toward his audience, and then again back to the wagon, he skeddaddled.

"Celestial Singers!" exclaimed Leopard Life, in wide-mouthed amazement, "w'at's thet?"

"Looks like er cannon," joined in Beeswax, the Butte. "Who kno's but et ar'?"

"Thunder! mebbe et ar'—an' we consarned fools settin' hyar, a-straddle o' our anymiles, as a mark," came from Territory Tim, he making a tumble for terra firma.

"Durn my moccasins ef I know w'at'er think," grunted the veteran of a hundred hair-lifts, Grizzly Len.

"I'll tell ye w'at I jedgel!" ventured Fifth Avenue Sam. "Et ar' w'at them ar' consarned Britishers call a Gatlin'-gun. I see'd one, in er show-windy on Fifth Avvy'noo, New York, an' et looked suthin' like thet yander. All a feller hes ter dew, arter he puts er han'ful o' ca't-ridges in a sorter o' pan, is ter turn er krank, w' er 'andel to et, an' holey heyyens! why, boyees, ther bullets just fly! as long's yer arum, til every one's gone!"

"Celestial Singers!" gasped the Leopard, as the stranger was now seen to approach the mysterious machine, "an' thar he cums w' ther ca't-ridges, now! Ter ther ground, b'yees, every mother's son on ye, and guv 'im a taste o' mineral substant from the Injin-territory lead-mines, ere he ken git hes infernal Gattler loaded!"

In an instant every man but Captain Chris, was on the ground, and their horses were wheeled sidewise, as a breastwork, while eleven rifles bore down toward the lone stranger.

"Hold on, you confounded Idiots!" here yelled Captain Chris, who had waited, with an amused smile, to see if his ignorant companions were really so deluded; "what in Heaven's name would you do? Put up your guns!"

"Celestial Singers!" growled Life, in angry accents, "d'ye take 's fur a lot er coyotes? We hain't er goin' ter let thet long-whiskered antelope riddle us w' ca't-ridges; no, not much! Quick, thar, b'yees; see? he's puttin' hes he'd under thet cloth, ter sight on ye! Guv him a blizzard!"

There was an ominous click! click! as the riflelocks were drawn back.

"Hold!" again shouted young Adams, his face paling, as he drew a revolver; for he saw the grim rangers were earnest in their belief—"don't you dare to pull a trigger—not one of you, or the man dies that does it!"

Not a weapon exploded, consequently. It was a scene worthy of the pencil of an artist. Eleven brassy knights of the border brought to bay by a single man, under the cover of his gleaming weapon; in the rear, to the north and to the south, a vast expanse of level plain lay in isolation and silence; while in the foreground was presented to view the lone tourist and his awe-inspiring machine, his pitiable apology for a horse, and the ghastly-looking vehicle.

"Put up your guns and mount!" commanded Captain Chris, as he at last saw the stranger emerge from in under the cloth which enveloped the camera, and motion for them to approach.

The rangers sullenly obeyed.

"You see you were scared at nothing," resumed Adams, with a chuckle. "Do you not yet comprehend what yonder object is?"

"No!" growled Territory Tim.

"Well, then I'll tell you. It is an apparatus for taking pictures—photographs!"

"Wal, by thunder!" were the astonished exclamations on all sides. "Ye don't say!"

In a few moments the entire cavalcade drew rein in front of the camera, and the stranger, a large, portly personage with immense whiskers and eyebrows, saluted them:

"How d'ye do, gentlemen! What in creation was the matter w' ye, when I was a-tryin' to take yer pictures a bit ago? Acted as how as ye were skeert!"

"They were frightened, the fools," laughed Chris. "Took your machine for a Gatling-gun, you see. But, who in Cain are you, governor?"

"Me—who am I?" exclaimed the stranger, in surprise. "Is it possible ye never heard tell on me? W-a-l thet's curious! I'm the famed Jonathan Jerrold, photographic professor, stereoscopist, and artist in nature's sublime beauties!"

CHAPTER III.

THE PHILIP'S REWARD.

"CELESTIAL SINGERS!" gasped the Leopard. "Then that ain't no gun, arter all, hey?"

"Certainly not," replied the artist. "It is an apparatus fur takin' a surpurer and kurrect representation uv yer facial delineaments, an' then transferring them in a highly satisfactory manner by the chemical aid o' photogenic processes, to er peepce of paper. When this remarkable acquirement ar' successfully accomplished, we go ter work, an' paste the piece o' paper onto a card; you then have as natural an neat a physiognomical and chromatical representation of yourself, as though ye war ter look in a hundred-an'-seventy-five-dollar French plate mirror!"

"Ye don't tell us! So ye war tryin' ter steal our good looks, war ye?" growled Grizzly Sam, fingering his six-shooter.

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"No! no! no!" cried Jonathan Jeriah, in abject terror. "don't shoot, Mr. Red-skin—no, drat it! Mr. Mr.—Mr.—Ranger, I mean—please—don't. I'll ax yer parding, ef ye won't shoot me!"

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the borderers. "Be quiet, boys," ordered Captain Chris, enjoying the scene quite as much as his companions. "Let our artist be. I say, governor, what are you doing out here in this Injin country? Can't be you've got much knowledge of the Apache, eh?"

"Kind sir" replied the photographer, "you speak truly. I'm not particularly acquainted with the inhabitants of this section of our Creator's sublime footstool; but, nevertheless, I am possessive of a lion-heart, and consequently it behooves me not to fear aught in these solitary haunts, but put my faith in the Almighty, and trust for the best."

"Yas!" said Circus Pete, grimly. "et's well enuff ter trust ter ther Old-Un, w'en ye're in sight o' ther fort, or at ther settlementz, but, w'en ye're w'in gun-shot o' ther 'Pash huntin'-grounds, I'll take revolvers, for my choice. Jest let er good big 'Pash git a squirt at them whiskers, an' thet ha'r o' yours, an' 'T'll bet er bufler, it'll be good-by fotygraffer!"

This caused a general laugh at Jerrold's expense, and Captain Chris added:

"Pete, here, knows what he is talking about, sir, and I agree with him that you are in a very dangerous position. Even with my dozen experienced Indian-fighters, I doubt if we get across the plains without hearing from the red-skins. You've come to a very unpropitious country to pursue your calling. Indians have no taste for the fine arts, and if you point your apparatus at them as you did at my boys, here, very likely your scalp will pay the forfeit. I'd advise you to put for the 'East,' as fast as you can!"

"Indeed! sir ranger, you seem to have a very poor opinion of me; but I care not a whit for your discouragement of my noble enterprise. To guide my footsteps back toward the Orient would be an utter impossibility. I am in the employ of the Cosmopolitan and International Bureau of Art, and am bound for the great lava beds via different routes, to photograph the spot where noble Canby fell."

"So ye're goin' to try Modoc, eh? Well, before you go that far, just make your will! Your family will doubtless need the benefit derived therefrom!"

"I say, captain," suggested the Leopard, "let's take him skerk w' us. 'Praps his consarned machine may skerk off ther 'Pash, when we git to ther gorge, and thereby save us a heap o' trubbel. An' tew, he ken fotygraff ther Demon Bufler!"

"Yas! yas!" put in the assemblage of fun-loving rangers, who foresaw a deal of sport in the companionship of this remarkable character, who had so strangely fallen across their path—"take 'im erlong. Will ye go 'lang w' us, Peech-blossom?"

"Kind sirs, you greatly honor me, and if you think that my company would be agreeable, I am not averse to linking my fortune with thine."

"Karee! thun et ar' settled; yeshall go 'lang. Ye shall see Cloven-Hoof, the Demon Bufler o' Texas! Ye shall see heaps o' Injuns; an' 'sides, we'll all hev our pictures taken. W'at d'ye say ter et, Capten Chris? hain't no 'jekkshuns ef we tote thes corn-krib erlong, hev ye? Reckon's we kin putreck 'im!"

"No," said Adams, who had been closely studying the artist, and had arrived at the conclusion that he was something more than his outward appearance indicated. In particular was noticeable the change in his manner of speech. Firstly, he had used the language of a Yankee, but now it was plain that his words were studied.

"No objection," he continued, "if you fellows choose to incumber yourselves with such a charge. Remember, though, we have yet two days' hard travel before us; and how do you expect to make any progress, with yon omnibus in tow?"

The rangers looked blank for a moment. They had not thought of the "schooner" and its ribby attaches.

"Never fear, sirs," broke in the artist. "Though yon beast of mine shows unmistakable signs of decay in places where flesh should predominate, yet, rest assured, kind sirs, that her youthful spirit has not been smothered!"

"You mean that the bone-yard is not beyond the powers of fast travel? That you can keep up with us?"

"Exactly. *La Belle* can hold her own with any courser of the century. Wait till I load my wagon, and then, lead on; I will follow!"

So saying, Jonathan Jeriah proceeded to pack the camera into the rear end of his wagon, and when this was done, he pulled down a long canvas curtain, so that none of the rangers' prying eyes should peer into the interior of his covered vehicle—inside the wagon.

Then, springing to a seat in front, he gave the word; the old sorrel stretched her bony neck, and struck out like a race-horse, for the West, followed by the amazed, as well as amused cavalcade, whose animals were left in the rear.

By and by the artist drew rein, and allowed the rangers to approach, and take the lead, while the sad-looking sorrel shacked along at their heels, lazily, making no show of an effort to keep up, although the animals in advance were galloping along at a rapid gait.

On moved the caravan. At length night closed in on the limitless expanse of plain; still the horsemen did not pause.

The full moon soared above the edge of the distant horizon, but no sign of a halt. Jonathan Jeriah seemed to grow uneasy, and, too, *La Belle* manifested less of a desire for nocturnal traveling than at first.

"Hello, there!" finally shouted the artist. "Hold up!"

The rangers came to a halt.

"What's wanted?" demanded Captain Chris, riding back to the vehicle.

"I would respectfully ask if it is the purpose of your worthy organization to encamp this evening, so that I can obtain a trifling collection of fodder with which to satisfy the cravings of our ravenous appetites," replied the student of nature, "and, also, so that we can stretch our limbs, upon these barren sands, and seek rest and repose."

"I reckon," laughed Adams. "We are in search of a trapper's cabin, hereabouts, but unless we find it before long, we shall go into camp soon."

Once more the caravan moved on, but an hour passed and still no sight of a cabin.

At last the Leopard drew rein.

"Ther's no use trampsin' 'round enny longer, cap'n," he declared, "fur I opine I'll hev ter gi'n up beat. I don't see no kinder signs o' er habbertashun, hyar 'bout, an' jedge we'll hev ter gi'n up the ship, fur ter-night, anyhow."

So a halt was made, and the horses turned loose to graze. As all were trained animals, no fears were entertained of their going astray.

La Belle, however, had no sooner arrived at the conclusion that her day's work was at an end, than she very deliberately lay down in the shafts, and closed her eyes.

"Celestial Singers," ejaculated Life, "see thar, Peech Blossom—yer hoss 'as laid down w' her gear in 'on. Shall we gi'n ye er lift, to raise her?"

"No," said Jonathan Jeriah, coolly; "it is the way she usually sleeps!"

And while the rangers were making a fire, the artist gathered a handful of grass for his pet.

"See hyar," interposed Fifth Avenue Sam. "Is thet all ye allow yer anymole, old snoozer?"

"Wait till you see," replied Jerrold.

When a fire had been kindled, and each of the ranger brigade were engaged in roasting their slice of savory venison, the artist disappeared within the sacred precincts of his wagon, and presently emerged, bearing two formidable chunks of "bar-meat," which he fastened to the ends of a couple sticks, and proceeded to broil, at the fire.

"Wagh!" grunted Grizzly Len, eying the contemplated meal, in unforgotten astonishment, "ye ain't er-goin' ter git outside o' all o' thet, ar ye, ole hoss? Skin me fur a bufler, but thar's enough to kill two ordinary buzzards!"

Jonathan did not answer, but went on with his work, and soon had the chunks of meat done to a fine brown. He then laid aside one for himself, and took the other over to *La Belle*, who, to the great wonder of all present, devoured it without a whimper, and immediately whined for more.

"That's a remarkable animal of yours, Cap," observed Adams, as he finished his slice of venison.

"Thinketh so, kind sir? Well, in all probability your words are full of wisdom. At least, I will not contradict you, and doubtless, in the future, you will become more strangely impressed with the singularities connected with yon equine."

After the meal was disposed of, the fire was permitted to expire; the horses were brought in and hopped, and Grizzly Sam and Len went on guard.

Jonathan Jeriah sought the inside of his "schooner" to repose, and the lone camp in the heart of the great plains soon was wrapped in silence.

Before long the two guards fell asleep; they had ridden far that day, and were too exhausted to do further duty; so they imprudently slept at their post. Hardly had they become wholly oblivious to time and sense when a man crept near and peered ahead into the camp.

After a moment's survey of the sleepers, he glided still nearer, and soon stood at the rear end of the artist's vehicle.

He was a brawny specimen of humanity, with immense length of arms and legs, and broad chest and shoulders. His face was covered with a stubble-beard, his eyes were of a piercing gray, while his hair was long, tangled and silvery-white.

A long rifle slung at his back was his only weapon in view, for his belt was minus the customary knife and pistol.

After assuring himself that he was still unnoticed, he proceeded to survey the conveyance before him.

"Humph," he muttered, under his breath. "Thes ar' quare. Nevyar see'd sich er contrivance in two year. Must be sum bu'sted up kerryan, or else et ain't; I dunno w'ich. Par'ps et ar' a Gipsy keert—but, kim ter think, thar hain't no Gips on ther plains, else it be 'Pash. Plenty on em', tho', an' not fur off, at thet. Wonder w'at's inside hyar, ennyhow? I jedge I'll investigate a bit!"

Reaching forth one hand, he unbuttoned the curtain, and lifting it on one side, peered in.

In an instant the loud report of a gun broke the stillness of the night, and the borderer staggered back, with an unearthly yell, for a portion of his cheek had been blown away, and his face was peppered in a pitiful manner, with fine salt and powder.

His wild yell brought every one of the rangers to their feet, and they huddled around him in surprise, awe, and amusement.

The gigantic stranger was hopping, jumping, and squirming about at a great rate, and giving vent to an unceasing stream of hideous yowls of pain and rage, that were frightful to hear. It was plain to see, however, that he was more scared than hurt, as the wound in his cheek had not quite laid the bone bare.

"Here! here!" ordered Captain Chris, shaking him by the shoulder; "shut up your howling, or you will have the whole Apache nation down on us. Dry up, I say! What's the matter with you? Great Heaven! is it you, Jack Bulard?"

"Me? On course et's me—w'at leetle thar's left on me. How! yow! yow! W'at d'ye keep in thar, ennyhow!" he belched forth, casting anything but ad-

mirring glances toward the "schooner." "I didn't kim hyer ter be blown inter koyote-fodder, not by enny means!"

At Adams's expressed wish he then related what is already known to the reader.

"How is this, professor?" queried the captain, turning to Jonathan Jeriah, who had emerged from his mystery-enshrouded vehicle, and was looking at the borderer with a strange twinkle in his bead-like eyes. "Did you shoot Bulard?"

"Nay, kind sir. I was wrapt in the dormant inclinations unto Morpheus, like yourself, when you prowling individual sought to penetrate the sanctity of my canvas-covered habitation, and incurred upon himself a just reproof for his audacious intrusion!"

"But what *did* the mischief? There was a report like a cannon, if I recollect!"

"Very likely, kind sir. The secrets of yonder studio are not for other eyes than mine, hence it behooves me to guard the rear entrance with a small, salt-loaded howitzer, in the event of my nocturnal repose, while the foremost end I blockade with my body. The gun I keep constantly loaded, and after I button the curtain down as I intend it shall remain, it behooves no man to pry into the conveyance. I give you this explanation that each man present may profit thereby, and prevent disfiguration of their physiognomistical countenances!"

Jack Bulard eyed the artist savagely.

"Nevyar mind, ole hoss," he groaned. "I'll git even w' ye, yet, ef et takes till next year; I ain't no de'd owl, yit!"

"Never mind, Jack," said Captain Chris, consolingly. "You'll get well in a jiffy. But tell me, where's your cabin and ranch? We could not find it, so we had to camp down here!"

"You're on my ranch now," growled Bulard.

"Pash burnt the cabin yesterday!"

"And the women? What of them?"

"Carr'd off, I reckon," was the reply, accompanied with horrible groans.

CHAPTER IV.

RETROSPECTION—OLD JACK'S STORY.

CAPTAIN CHRIS ADAMS is so well known throughout the Far West and Nor-west, that no words of ours are necessary to proclaim his fame. No braver man has ever trod the wilds of the frontier. With his invincible rangers he has done many a service for the Government, in the way of repelling raids from various bands of desperadoes and hostile savages, that the fathers at Washington will not soon forget. Montana, the principal scene of his operations, is justly proud of this friend and protector, and he and his gallant fellows to this day are ever welcome invaders of the wilderness territory.

Several weeks previous to the day when we first saw the "Invincibles" on the Texan plains, Captain Adams had received a call from Camp Supply, signed by several prominent citizens, requesting his presence there with his band of rangers. So, selecting twelve of his best men, he had left Fort Buford on the long and dangerous trip to the South.

The rangers, all old and toughened sprigs of the frontier tree, could stand almost any amount of hard riding.

Among them were men notorious for their daring, skill and bravery—such as Life the Leopard; Fifth Avenue Sam; Beeswax, (colored); Grizzly Len; Grizzly Sam, Territory Tim, Alaska Ben, and others.

Finally arrived at Camp Supply, young Adams was not a little surprised to meet Governor Coke, who at once took the ranger into consultation.

The object of the call of the rangers from their northern home was soon made plain.

In the northern portion of Texas a great excitement prevailed which had become akin to a panic among the inhabitants in that section—a panic that seriously threatened to unsettle a vast tract of cultivated land.

By the earnest endeavors and constant inducements of Land Commissioner Groos, several little settlements had sprung up, prosperous farms were under tillage, and the population was rapidly increasing, until the appearance of the "scourge," as the settlers termed "the mystery."

Many wealthy citizens had purchased homes and settled in the section, and it was the desire of the State authorities to offer such inducements as would keep them there.

The prevailing mystery and excitement were produced by the appearance of an unknown and unseen band of desperadoes, styling themselves the *Vultures*, on frequently distributed placards, and who were headed by a nondescript being—a mysterious, cloven-footed creature, whom the more superstitious settlers firmly believed possessed of the devil.

This Cloven-Hoof, as it was called, was in bodily developments shaped not unlike a man, but the feet were cloven, like those of his Satanic majesty are supposed to be, while, instead of a human head, the gigantic head of a buffalo surmounted a large bull-neck, over which flowed a jetty mane. And, another wonder, the frightful object was possessed of no arms or hands. The lower part of the body was covered with glistening scales, like those of a fish, and, too, it was suspected that, together with all his other infernal qualifications, Cloven-Hoof was an amphibious monster.

This mysterious thing was wont to lead his men upon the settlements, and not unfrequently down against the wagon trains, in the dead of night, and while he was attracting the attention of whatever sentinels might be posted, his minions would pounce upon and plunder the wagons, and with such stealth and mysterious success that they were rarely if ever seen.

Such was the idea the governor gave Captain

Adams of the mystery, adding, that the settlers and inhabitants of the Government lands were becoming thoroughly alarmed, and that unless something be done immediately to quell the superstition and to "lay" the Cloven-Hoof, there would be, undoubtedly, a precipitate desertion of the section, which it had taken years of unceasing perseverance and labor to populate.

Should the present settlers be frightened away, years might pass ere they could be replaced.

"Government" never farms out its wild lands, and has no agents for making settlements and collecting revenues from leases, etc.

So it was vitally necessary that the matter should be thoroughly investigated; hence the ranger was summoned from his far northern haunts, and offered a munificent reward should he succeed in overhauling the band of outlaws, which he consented to do, and after a brief rest set out for Zossei, a little settlement nearest the principal scene of the depredations, armed with a letter from the lieutenant-governor to one Alonzo Nesmit, a leading spirit and citizen of the infested community.

Desiring, for a purpose best known to himself, to increase his band to twelve men, aside from their leader, Captain Chris had laid his course across the plains toward the cabin of his prospective father-in-law, old Jack Bulard, whom he hoped to enlist in his service.

Under what inauspicious circumstances the two met, we have already related. Let us, then, once more, look back upon the camp.

"Great Heaven!" gasped Adams, reeling back at Bulard's declaration; "carried off by the Apaches? Horrible! Go on, old man, and do not keep me in suspense. Tell me all!"

The old scout coolly seated himself upon one of the hubs of the wagon-wheels, and after filling and lighting his pipe, puffed away a few moments, contentedly.

"Ken't tell ye how et war dun, boyee," he replied, rubbing his hand dubiously over his lacerated cheek. "Ye see I war out on er long trip up ter ther Platte, an' w'en I left hum ther femayles war gittin' erlong skrumphis-like; so I didn't worry much erbout 'em. But, yesterday, w'en I erri'd back 'bout dusk, an' I found that ther 'Pash hed bin thar, 'arly in ther mornin', an' cremated my ranch, I tell ye I war mad as er goose in settin' time. I kuld'n't find nerry sign o' the femaynes, so I jedged they war amputated—no, ther ain't ther word; le's see! Abdicateded, am et, capten?"

"Abducted, you mean?"

"Yas—thet ar' et. Abdicateded! Wal, as I war say'n, I jedged ther rotten 'Pash had got ther gals—my gal an' yers—, an' I war 'bout diggin' fur ther settlement, w'en I spied you."

"What! you saw us so long ago as last evening?"

"Wal, yas—or 'bout ther same. I see'd yer camp-fire. I kno'd 'tweren't 'Pash blazes, fur 'Pash ain't no such big fools as ter expose ther carcasses by buildin' fires, w'en old Jack Bulard ar' 'bout. So I conjured up ther idee, that mebbe said fules might be vally ble accessories, and resowled ter wait til they kin up. So I waited!"

"Perhaps, kind sir, 'twas my camp illumination that you perceived," ventured Jonathan Jeriah, "as last evening I kindled a considerable of a flame, from ignitable weeds!"

"Yas—recken 'twere sum ignerent jackass like ye, ef I'm er jedge o' sitch riphts. Anneyhow, I buried up in ther sand, like er prairie-dog, an' wa'ted tel ye camped down yere, w'en I concluded ter inspect matters. Cuss ther shuten blunderbus; I'm er sp'ilt chicken, sure!"

"How know you that the Apaches are the captors of Gussie and your wife?" demanded Captain Chris.

"Don't klo' fur sartin. Thar's suthin' mighty cur'us 'bout et, w'ich I ken't parse in my grammar."

"And what is it?"

"Wal, I'll tell ye. I pried round the premises, an' disklivered that ther main heft on ther gang, halted erbout two hundred yeeards off frum whar my ranch stood, an' near's I kuld jedge, they remained thar. I saw the tracks o' one animal, as wero rid ter the cabin, when thar soon became two horses' foot-prints inst'ed o' one. But, ther dickens o' et war, one hoss must hev had four feet an' t'other two, ca'se I could extinguish w'ar ther four-futed beast stood, by ther larger tracks; an' see whar suthin' made er kuppel o' tra'ks, alone! An' quarest o' all, cap'n, not er human hoof-print could I deskliver—not er single sign o' un, tho' I s'arched high an' low!"

"Hal!" ejaculated Captain Chris, excitedly. "I believe, then, I have the solution of what seems a mystery to you!"

Whereupon he related the strange story about Cloven-Hoof, and all about their present expedition to Zossei, where they intended to begin operations. Bulard listened with the greatest interest.

"An' ye thenk my femerlines war kerried off by thes Cloven-Hoof?"

"I haven't the least doubt of it. The two-foot or hoof-prints, which you saw, that were not to be accounted for, as only one horse approached the cabin, are doubtless the tracks of the horse's rider, who was the mysterious Cloven-Hoof!"

"Wal, boyee, I opine ye're right; but et ar' b'yant my grammar-pars'n erkomplishments. An' ye tell me ye're goin' right down ter hunt this critter?"

"Yes. We shall take up the trail of these horse-men in the morning, and by following it, I believe we will sooner or later learn something definite as to their whereabouts."

"Pars yer right, capten. Enneyhow, hyar's w'at I'll stick to ye clusser'n er coat o' tar'n-le'thers. Ef we diskliver ther femerlines, all rite. Ef we don't, the 'Pash I'll ketch blazes, w'en I do git at 'em. Oh! Jerusalem! won't I make ther ha'r bristle, tho!"

And the borderer chuckled, grimly, in anticipation

of his contemplated swoop down upon the detested Apaches.

"Good," said Adams. "Now, all hands, turn in, again. Mornin' will soon be upon us!"

The rangers once more rolled themselves in their blankets, and not deeming it necessary to post a guard for the remainder of the night, none was set. The artist retired to his vehicle, and soon the camp was wrapped in silence.

But, ere they were asleep, fortunately a strange sound aroused them. It was the snort of Jerrold's animal *La Belle*—a snort that betokened affright. Every man was on his feet in a moment.

Each felt that the mare's fright was not feigned, for the sagacious beast had arisen to her feet and was extremely uneasy.

Grasping their guns the rangers peered through the surrounding gloom, which, the moon having gone down, was deeper and more impenetrable than before.

Nothing was to be seen, and on listening intently, naught save the low faint breathing of the horses could be heard.

Jonathan Jeriah Jerrold soon appeared from his boudoir, and was told of the uneasy conduct of *La Belle*.

He shook his head, dubiously.

"He certainly perceived or heard something of a suspicious nature, else why this agitation?" he replied.

Ten minutes passed in restless watching by the rangers.

"Celestial Singers!" suddenly yelled the Leopard; "look thar!"

He pointed to the east, where a blood-red rocket had left the pall-shrouded earth, and was soaring far up and across the starlit sky, like a fiery serpent. "Injuns!" cried Fifth Avenue Sam.

"Yas! an' 'Pash, too," assented Bulard. "Keep yer peepers skinned fur more on them signals, boyees. They're w'at skeert ther hoss, I speculate!"

An anxious watch was now kept on either side, and soon a blue rocket shot up from the south. This was immediately answered by a white one from the north.

"Thet settles et!" announced old Jack, examining his gun, in a business-like way. "Ther fust one, w'ich skeert ther 'oss, war fired in ther north. Cock yer pill-boxes, boyees, fur we're surrounded by not less'n a hundred 'Pash!"

And even as he spoke, a confused chorus of distant war-cries, coming from either direction, broke the stillness of the clear night!

CHAPTER V.

THE SWOOP OF THE VULTURES.

NOT many leagues to the west of the settlement of Zossei, which was to be the destination of Captain Adams and his "Invincibles," stands the little Spanish-Mexican town of Los Des Pumas.

Formerly it had been a fortress, in the old times, but now the walls were crumbling with age, and the Mexicans and half-breed natives had built themselves outside the grim old fortifications, numerous adobe haciendas, and thus a considerable area of territory was occupied by the site of the "silent city."

The inhabitants of Los Des Pumas were of a shiftless, lazy turn, and were never known to do a day's work, though the soil and general character of their isolated surroundings were adapted to farming, fruit-raising, and the like.

It was rarely that any stir about the town could be observed, and many were the speculations made by the industrious citizens of Zossei, over the listlessness and idleness of their unobtrusive, dark-skinned neighbors of the "silent city."

On the night of the strange advent of the old borderer, Jack Bulard, into the rangers' camp, a scene was occurring at Los Des Pumas that we must record, as it will have a bearing upon our narrative.

About sunset a man rode into the little town from the direction of the range of mountains to the east, and demanded to see the officer in command, as he had important news to communicate.

On being shown inside the grim old ruins of the fortress, and into the presence of the *alcalde*, a small, evil-faced Spaniard, the stranger gave a sigh of relief, and accepted a proffered seat.

"Well—" began the Spaniard, but the stranger interrupted him.

"There is no time for parley," he said, hurriedly.

"How many men can you arm, to repel an attack?"

"To repel an attack!" gasped General Murrillo, in amazement. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," was the reply, "that in less than an hour Los Des Pumas will be attacked by a large band of American soldiers, with the view to plundering the town, and subsequently turning it into a military post!"

Conales Murrillo grew ashen white, and sprang wildly from his chair.

"Dost speak the truth, man?" he cried, sagely.

"I tell you nothing that the hour will not prove. How many fighting hands can you mount and arm?"

"Every man and woman in Los Des Pumas, if necessary. All persons under my control, that exceed the age of ten years, are skilled in the use of both lance and carbine."

"Good. I had little idea this village was so strong in points of defense; but so much the better. Listen, Senor Murrillo, and I will tell you my plans, as I have a vital interest in this town and its safety. Now, these Yankee filibusters have pitched their camp in the valley, two miles from this spot, and are actively engaged in cleaning up their weapons, preparatory to a night charge upon Los Des Pumas. They must not do it, senor—do you hear?—they must not attack the village. Mount yourself and every human under your command that can lift a rifle, and I will lead

you against the accursed Yanks. From the bluff above the valley, we can charge down upon them, and sweep away their heft; and then no attack will be made!"

"But, senor, what shall be done with the children, and my lovely daughters—Nola and Inez?"

"Secrete them in the mines underneath us!" replied the stranger, watching the Mexican narrowly.

Murrillo leaped back aghast.

"Who are you?" he gasped, "that you know so much?"

The stranger smiled. He was a young man in years, to all appearances, but his features were so covered with beard that it was next to impossible to make out their expression. His eyes and hair were jetty black in color, and his form, which was clad in habiliments of the mountaineer, was a marvel of symmetry and muscular development. A sombrero, drawn closely down to the eyes, effectively concealed the upper portion of his countenance.

"Who am I?" he repeated, after stroking his beard for a moment, as if in deep thought. "Well, my name is Pietro Gonzellos, and I am an individual who knows every crook and corner of Los Des Pumas, and also the secrets thereof. Is it not enough that I offer to save yours and yourself from capture—ay, perhaps death?"

"Yes; but let us not talk longer. You remain here, and I will order everything ready."

So saying, Murrillo hurried from the council-chamber, leaving Gonzellos alone.

No sooner had the *alcalde* disappeared, than the stranger arose excitedly, and paced to and fro.

"It will work! It cannot fail to work!" he muttered, a strange smile lurking in his eyes. "Then!"

He did not finish the sentence, for a light footstep upon the tiled floor close at hand, caused him to wheel around.

A maiden of some sixteen summers stood before him—a fair-haired, light-faced creature, in whose soulful eyes gleamed the light of purity and truth. She was very beautiful, both in face and form, and a remarkable contrast to the olive-skinned beings who went to make up the citizens of Los Des Pumas.

Pietro Gonzellos sprang forward with a low, glad cry.

"Inez! Inez!" he exclaimed, as he clasped the maiden to his breast. "Thank God we meet once more!"

"Yes, Philip; but why are you here in this disguise? Does my father know you?"

"Yes; as Pietro Gonzellos. You recollect, dearest, that the life of Phil Warren would not be worth a whistle, were he to appear in Los Des Pumas undisguised. These accursed greasers have no liking for the King of the Hills!"

And here the man gave vent to a merry laugh.

"True; and I wonder how you dare come here now. But Philip," and the beautiful maiden's tones were full of anxiety, "tell me why you have come here to-night? I know your presence in Los Des Pumas bodes no good to my father, and the villagers. Oh, my friend, the scene of two years ago is not going to be repeated, I hope!"

"No, fair Inez, no. Though I cannot tell you what changes may speedily transpire, rest assured no danger will befall you. Hear! there is the flare of the trumpet that calls me away. Adieu, sweetest! May my meetings with you henceforth be longer and more frequent!"

Imprinting a kiss upon the full, rosy lips of the maiden, Pietro Gonzellos turned and hurried from the room. In a dark passage he suddenly stumbled against Murrillo, the *alcalde*.

"Come!" ejaculated he, turning back and preceding the stranger, "I have everything all in readiness!"

He led the way out into the court-yard that was fenced in by the grim old walls of the fortification. Here a strange scene was presented. Some hundred and twenty horses were drawn up abreast, their noses facing the ponderous gates opening out into the village, and on their backs were mounted a motley crowd of men, women and children, armed with long lances and carbines slung to the pommels of their Mexican saddles.

Some were evil-faced greasers, a few half-blooded Navajos and a godly portion of the band were young and old Mexican women and children.

"There!" said Murrillo, with a proud gesture, "see them, will you. There is not another town in Mexico which can turn all of the inhabitants, old and young, into fighting trim. But come, Senor Gonzellos, let's mount and away. As you have said, Los Des Pumas must not be attacked. The discovery of the wealth beneath your fortress would soon bring an avalanche of the accursed Yankee fortune-hunters down into this region!"

The two men mounted their own horses; then, as the fortress gates swung open they led the way at a gallop in the direction of the little valley, followed by the motley band of "defenders."

Pietro Gonzellos took the command, and in half an hour drew rein at the foot of the hill beyond which wound the valley.

"You must all remain here!" he ordered, as he dismounted, "until you hear a shrill whistle. I will creep to the crest of the bluff, and spy down upon the Americans in the valley. When I see a suitable chance for a charge against them I will give said whistle, when you must dash up the bluff and make a precipitate rush down upon them. They will, of course, be surprised, and an easy victory will be yours. But, remember one thing, don't come until I give the signal."

The next instant he had thrown himself upon all-fours and wriggled off through the darkness, which now enveloped the earth.

When the moon emerged from the bank of clouds that had shrouded it and threw its mellow rays down

upon the bluff, Pietro Gonzellos was nowhere to be seen. He had doubtless gone beyond the ridge on his spy-mission.

With great impatience the hot-tempered Mexicans waited for the signal, but an hour dragged by, and still there came not the promised whistle from the scout.

Murrillo finally uttered a savage protest, and urged his horse up the slope.

"Come on," he ordered, "and let's see what this means. Perhaps Gonzellos has been captured!"

The whole party spurred swiftly to the top of the bluff and came to a momentary halt, while their eyes swept the little treeless valley below, which was flooded with soft white moonlight.

Not a person was to be seen!

Not a sign of a camp, nor where one had been pitched could be found on searching the valley.

They had been "sold," and for what?

Let us return to the "silent city" and see, in company with the angry cavalcade.

The deepest silence hovered about the old fortress and the low haciendas, outside the crumbling walls. The ponderous gates were wide ajar, and the trampled grass near by showed but too plainly the imprint of many horses' feet.

"Curses on us for a pack of fools," hissed Murrillo, dashing fiercely into the courtyard and flinging himself from his horse. "In our absence the town has been sacked! Ho, there, you groveling! Dismount at once, and let a thorough search be made!"

And a search was made accordingly. Every residence in Los Des Pumas had been ruthlessly plundered.

The fortress had not escaped, for in an apartment where the *alcade* kept his gold and jewels was found his rifled desk. Everything was taken that was of value.

But, worst of all came, when Murrillo read the following on a placard that had been conspicuously posted in the council chamber:

"ALCALDE MURRILLO, DEAR SIR:

We, the Vultures of the Border, are very much indebted to you for the large quantity of gold which we found in the *minas* beneath this room. Likewise we are indebted to you for your two beautiful daughters, Nola and Inez, whom we adopt. The other *small fry*—children—who were left to us, we took pity upon, and have shut them in a dungeon beneath the ruins. Having relieved you of all that can be of any future use to us, we shall not again trouble you until you unearth some more of that precious ore which lies beneath the fortress. Signed

"VULTURES."

"Cloven-Hoof, the Infernal, Commanding!"

Directly beneath this were numerous dirty tracks upon the clean floor—tracks made by none other than the terrible and much-feared *Cloven-Hoof*!

In an hour when they were least expected the mysterious "Vultures" had swooped down on hitherto unmolested Los Des Pumas, and secured as spoils a couple of pretty maidens and a large quantity of gold* in the rough and nuggets, with which they had long since escaped to their unknown retreat.

CHAPTER VI.

THE "INVINCIBLES' VICTORY—THE FACE IN THE PICTURE.

At the first sound of the savage yells the rangers, as of one accord, cocked their rifles and waited for the onset.

Nearer and nearer came the screeching savages, and then, all at once, a dozen dusky forms burst into view on either side, making the night hideous with their whoops of triumph.

"Fire!" shouted Captain Chris, "and then use your revolvers!"

Instantly there was a lightning glare of light which lit up the scene for a moment; then the report of fourteen rifles, drowning out even the Apaches' cries.

Then the rangers drew their revolvers, and poured a terrible fire into the dusky ranks.

Wild yells and groans rose on every side. Fifth Avenue Sam fell dead, with a lance through his body, and another of the hardy band of rangers soon dropped in his tracks, with an arrow in his breast.

The Indians were not mounted, and this inspired young Adams with the hope that maybe they were not as strong in numbers as old Jack had prophesied. But, be this as it might, they were pressing down upon the band, closer and closer, and the rangers could not hold out against such odds for a great while longer. Already they were bleeding from numerous wounds, and beginning to waver.

High above the din of battle could occasionally be heard the stentorian voice of the Leopard, as he leaped fearlessly into the thickest of the fight.

"Outen ther way, thar, ye ornery de'cendant o' ther divel!—*git*, will ye! Take thet. Whoop! yoop! herra! Slap at ter 'em, b'yeen. Take thet, ye American Arab! Ker-whoop! see ther fallen angels fall, an' still er fallin'! Celestial Singers! how we do rip 'em open, though! Yas, an' thar goes ernuther son o' copperass ter ther roastin' furniss. Hall kerlimber, happy footstule!"

Crack! bang! whiz! came from every side, and closer came the infuriated Apaches. Their loss had been immense, and they were determined to capture the dauntless little band if such a thing could be accomplished.

Among the fiercest of the rangers stood Jonathan Jeriah, and the detriment he did to the foe was

equal to that of any man around him, if not more. But, at last, he became weak and faint from a terrible loss of blood, and soon he dropped his clubbed gun, and retreated to his "schooner." Not long was he gone, however, for he presently stood among his companions again, and on his shoulder he carried a light dismounted howitzer. The truck which stood at the rear end of the wagon was wheeled forward by Grizzly Len, and in a moment more the little bronze piece was trained down toward where the heavier part of the attack was being made.

To charge it almost to the muzzle with bullets and slugs was a short job, and then, as at a word, the rangers swerved to each side, leaving an open path, the artist exploded his gun.

A roar that fairly shook the earth was the answer, and this was succeeded by a terrible chorus of shrieks and howls from the wounded red-skins, not less deafening.

The charge had mowed down a wide path in the ranks of the foe, and caused them to retire in a panic of combined fear and horror.

Taking advantage of this lull, the rangers hastily reloaded rifles and revolvers, but not another shot or arrow was fired.

Morning finally dawned and the rangers, to their astonishment, ascertained that not an Apache—except their dead—was in sight. They had temporarily withdrawn, doubtless to strengthen their forces, both in arms and numbers.

"Tain't ther last we'll see on 'em," said old Bulard, scanning the vast, glowing expanse with the captain's glass. "Thar hain't er sneaker set o' buzzards on 'arh 'n them same 'Pash. We'll hev ter heave more le'd at 'em 'g'in, 'fore many centuries, I speculate."

Around the camp was a fearful sight. The outstretched forms of nearly two score of savages, marked the results of the defender's heroic resistance. The yellow sands were dyed with human gore, and here and there lay the brains of some unfortunate Apache, whose head had come in contact with a clubbed rifle. Prominent among the dead, lay the quiet forms of poor Fifth Avenue, and "Buffle," who had "gone under" in the affray.

After Jonathan Jeriah had loaded his howitzer once more into the "schooner," he emerged from the canvas-cover with a spade, with which a large grave was hollowed out in the sandy plain. Here were interred the remains of Samuel Everston, and Al Kennor, and then, with tearful eyes, the cavalcade resumed its journey toward Zossei, Jerrold bringing up the rear with *La Belle* and his peripatetic habitation.

All day the strange caravan struggled on, looking like a diminutive serpent on the boundless sea of level sand. At night a halt was again made, and after the evening meal was dispatched, a triple guard was posted.

The remainder of the party rolled themselves in their blankets for a nap except Jerrold, who, as before, disappeared within the precincts of his "schooner."

Captain Adams lay a long time, staring thoughtfully up at the starlit vault of blue, overhead, and pondering over the past and future.

All the long day they had followed the plain trail of the supposed abductors of Mrs. Bulard and Guess, but, as yet, they were not off from the plains, and could not expect to sight them. And, too, not a sign of an Apache had been discovered—a fact which inspired the hope that the reds would not make another attack.

The night passed without incident worthy of mention. As soon as it was barely light a start was made and no halt ordered until noon, when Captain Chris gave the signal for a stop.

Taking from his well-worn wallet a map, which had been previously prepared and forwarded to the Governor, by Alouzo Nesmit, he spread it out before him and studied it intently, glancing ever and anon at the face of the little compass which he held in his hand.

They had now left the plains, and were in a broken, rocky and wooded portion of country, about twenty miles south of Zossei. Directly before them yawned a deep, narrow seam, sunken fifty feet into the bowels of the earth, and running northerly through a dense pine forest, toward the village, while its southerly course pointed toward the mountains, and was guarded by a spectral boundary of *dead pines*, whose naked branches pointed like skeleton fingers up against the smiling sky. This change from life to death began near where the rangers had halted, and presented a most striking spectacle. The seam, or gorge, was walled in by perpendicular sides, and had evidently in former days been a water-course—the bed of a deep and silent river. Now, not a particle of water was to be seen upon the gravelly bottom, far below. Either the stream had dried up, or else it had found its way toward the Rio Grande through some other channel.

After studying the map intently for a while, Captain Chris turned to the grizzly-faced fellows around him.

"Boys," he said, "we have come a long way out of our path. Zossei, as near as I can ascertain, lies twenty miles to the north."

A growl of displeasure went up from the men.

"And 've got ter wait hyar, or go up ter Zossei?" questioned the Leopard.

"Remain here, of course. You could do little or no good there. I find, by my map, that Zossei is on the banks of this water-course, and by following it, I shall experience no difficulty in finding the town. I shall start for there, at once, and you may expect me back by to-morrow night. Pitch your camp in the gulch here, and be sure and get it on an exact line between the dead and live timber. I can then easily find you on my return. Let me warn you all,

however, not to venture too far in yon ghostly forest. It is spoken of in the Galveston papers as the Phantom Forest, and they say spookierish objects that can in no way be accounted for, roam therein. It may be a *hornet's nest*; so look out!"

"Or, it mought be war this 'ere kritter, Cloven-Hoof, holds out!" suggested the Leopard.

"True, I had not thought of that. You may be correct; anyhow, keep your eyes peeled, and look out for Apache. Now, good-by to you."

And, touching the spur to his horse, Captain Chris dashed off toward the north. He found that the wooded seam was not crooked in its course, but, indeed, nearly straight, and this was greatly in his favor.

The country through which he passed was wild, broken and unsettled, and as a general thing overgrown with cactus and sage-bush. But, about an hour before sunset, he entered a populated section, where numerous little white haciendas and farm-houses were dotted here and there and signs of prosperity on every side;—here a field of waving corn, there an expanse of billowy grain, and over yonder a plowed field—all of which betokened the presence of the industrious emigrant from the "States."

This was the State land, which the commissioners were endeavoring to populate, and which the appearance of the mysterious Cloven-Hoof and his band of Vultures, threatened to dispeople and lay once more to waste.

On a bluff to the right of this scene, was a small village of not more than a score of habitations, while beyond, to the north and east, were more ranches and thriving farms.

Just as the dry red sun was nearing the horizon, Captain Chris struck into the one trail or "street" of Zossei, and galloped up to the saloon over which hung a sign, suspended by cords and staples to two lofty flag-poles, and which bore these words:

"DUTCH FRED'S ZOSSEI RANCH."

On the steps of this edifice, two burly half-breeds were loafing.

"Can you inform me where one Alouzo Nesmit resides?" asked Adams, as he reined in his horse.

Both men stared at him, curiously, but neither offered to answer the question. After waiting a few moments, Captain Chris repeated the interrogation, surprised at not receiving a reply; but as before the fellows remained perfectly "mum."

"Confound it! can you not answer a civil question?" exclaimed the ranger, flushing angrily.

"Then, I'll seek some other more civil informant!"

The loungers apparently had no objections, and so Chris rode on.

"Here's a go," he muttered, reflectively. "I wonder what those fellows mean?"

He soon came to a grocery store, in front of which sat a grim old fellow, astride a saw-horse.

"Can you direct me to the residence of Alouzo Nesmit?" was the ranger's question.

The store-keeper looked up with a quizzical stare, but did not reply.

"Curse it! d'ye hear me speak, you old villain?" now shouted the ranger, quite beside himself.

Still no reply.

Chris drew a revolver from his belt, and cocked it, determinedly.

"Now give me the directions," he cried, taking aim, "or I'll—"

"Down thar's whar ther cunnel hold's out!" growled the store-keeper, pointing one long bony finger toward a low ancient hacienda of Spanish architecture, which nestled in the flats below the village.

Captain Chris put up his weapon, and galloped off down the slope, followed by a loud guffaw from the old man at the grocery.

"Curse it!" he mused, savagely, "I wonder what these close-tongued idiots mean! Ha! here comes a farmer; I'll ask him, just for the sport of it, to see if he 'll speak!"

An odd-looking specimen of the ranchero was coming up the hill, and as Captain Chris drew rein, he stopped also.

Then the horseman asked the same question.

"Can you direct me to the residence of Alouzo Nesmit?"

The farmer stared at his interrogator a few moments, vacantly, then once more shouldered his crow-bar, and trudged composedly along without answering.

Adams was both amused and mystified. He could not fathom the meaning of this singular conduct of these people. Were they simple and half-witted, as they appeared, or was there some *motif*, behind all this silence and reserve.

He pondered deeply on the subject as he galloped on. At last he drew up in front of the hacienda, which was built of adobe, with many quaint and curious angles, wings and projections.

A roofed veranda ran all around the edifice, and on this a swarthy Mexican was lounging. As Captain Chris dashed up, he left his bench, and came forward, bowing with many smirks and smiles.

"I desire to see Colonel Nesmit," said the ranger, in the Mexican tongue.

"The senior will have to wait," replied the peon.

"The master is at Zossei, and will return soon. Will the senior come inside?"

Dismounting and securing his horse, Captain Chris was ushered into a magnificently-furnished parlor.

"I'll send the master when he arrives," said the peon, and in a moment he was gone.

Captain Chris sunk into a luxurious arm-chair, and stared about him. He was not accustomed to entering such costly places as this parlor, but he knew enough of the country now to be surprised at nothing, however strange it might seem.

Rare old pictures graced the frescoed walls, and

* Gold was really found beneath the ruined fortress at Los Des Pumas, but the mine finally played out, and all attempts since that to discover gold in this region have been in vain.

beautiful statuettes faced from little alcoves into the room.

One picture in particular, attracted the ranger's attention.

It was a large life-sized picture of a young Mexican cavalier, reaching from the floor to the ceiling.

The face was strangely life-like for a painting, and the form a model of perfection. But, most strange of all were the eyes. They were jetty black in color, and darted out an evil, snakish expression at the ranger that made him uneasy.

"Humph!" muttered Captain Chris, thoughtfully, "what can art not produce? That is the best portrait of an evil Spanish-Mexican I ever beheld. How natural those snake eyes are—staring direct down at me as if they were trying to read me through and through. Egad! if I did not know better I'd swear those optics were of flesh and blood."

There was something awe-inspiring in the power of the eyes in the picture, for they glared directly and steadily at the ranger, as if trying to mesmerize him.

Uncomfortable under the singular power that held his attention to the painted face, Captain Chris rose and strolled to the other end of the apartment. Happening soon after to glance back at the portrait, a chill of something akin to horror crept along his spine, as he perceived that those same snake eyes were still riveted upon him.

With an impatient exclamation he turned his back upon the annoying sight. He was growing nervous.

Not many moments passed, however, ere he ventured to again glance at the face. An oath burst from his lips as he did so, for he distinctly saw those terrible orbs roll in their sockets!

CHAPTER VII.

THE MOUNTAIN GROTTO—THE MAIDENS.

"WAY up among the peaks of a craggy and rugged chain of mountains, whose snow-capped crests seemingly touched the clouds, was a huge grotto, whose existence would not have been dreamed of by the inhabitants of the earth, far below.

It was a large natural honeycomb in the cold, gray rock. Beside one principal chamber, there were a dozen other smaller cells, which ran back and were lost in a labyrinth of intricate and roughened passages.

In the principal chamber was blazing a ruddy fire of pitchy cones, and before this fire, seated on blocks of solid rock, were three girls and an Indian.

The two girls who most resembled each other were apparently sisters, and were strikingly beautiful.

One of them was a blonde and the other a brunette—two as well-formed and modest-appearing maidens as one would wish to see.

They were the stolen daughters of Conales Murrillo, the alcalde of Los Des Pumas, and the blonde was the same who met Pietro Gonzales in the council-chamber, previous to the mysterious sacking of the town by the notorious "Vultures!"

Though Inez and Nola Murrillo were very pretty after their fashion, the third maiden was more beautiful than either.

She was young—not more than eighteen—and possessed of a slender sylph-like form, a pure, Grecian cast of countenance and a soft, creamy complexion, while her eyes were of a soulful blue shade, and her hair, brown and curling. Her face, expressive of a genial nature, was now clouded with sorrow.

The Indian who made up the quartette was a brawny brave, with a handsome face, even though it was daubed with paint. He was armed with pistols, knife and rifle, and fastened upon his back was a bow and quiver of arrows.

Inez Murrillo was speaking:

"And, are you sure that the intentions of this Cloven-Hoof are what you have told us, Philip?"

"Certainly, my dear. I would not lead you to fear what is false. I am seriously afraid that our terrible chief will do as he said—sell you to the Arapahoes for horses, which can be disposed of for large profits, East. Not so with pretty women!"

"What kind of a monster is this robber chief—a demon?"

"A veritable evil spirit from hell, I firmly believe. Around him he has gathered as lawless a set of humans in the shape of men as years of secret search could discover. They love the wild life of the free-booter, and as he feeds them well with gold and whisky, they are glad to stick by him."

"And you, Philip, who have won my love, serve in this gang?"

"Alas! my darling, I do, but it is not because I love the life. I am bound by an oath, for ten years, not to desert, expose or otherwise work against this league. My ten years of bondage expire two months hence, and then if I cannot be again forced to take the binding oath, I will be killed!"

"Oh, Philip!"

"Yes, darling; I know it seems cruel, but trust in me; Phil Warren will never die without a struggle. A band of plucky rangers are known to be entering this country to protect the settlers and to hunt us down. If luck should be in our favor, and you not carried off into the Arapahoe country, perhaps I can somehow effect your escape."

"But, Philip, I will never go back to Los Des Pumas. Bah! the very thought of my guardian is repugnant."

"Nor shall you go there, dearest. In the leader of the expected ranger band I have an oldtime mate—brave, true and fearless Chris Adams, who will protect you for me."

The third maiden of the party uttered a low, glad cry.

"Adams—Mr. Adams, did you say?" she asked, eagerly, quickly.

"Yes; do you know him, miss?"

"Yes, sir; he is one of my best friends. In fact—" and the beautiful girl blushed scarlet—"he is to be my husband—that is if I ever get free from this gloomy prison!"

The bogus Indian sprung to his feet with an ejaculation.

"Is that so? Well, then, I'm right glad to see you. I count Chris Adams as one of my best friends, too, though I'd be ashamed to have him know me in this position of an outlaw. And what is your name, miss?"

"Guess Bulard, sir."

The disguised lover of Inez Murrillo reeled back as though he had been shot. "You are not the daughter of old Jack Bulard, whose remarkable spouse escaped the boys in the Phantom Forest, are you?"

"I am."

The bogus Indian took his seat again, and went off into a reverie. Finally he looked up, and said: "This is news to me, miss. I have heard of you before, but did not dream you were the woman grown from a little child whom old Jack once rescued from death in McKandlass swamp. Did he ever tell you about it, and of your little dead brother?"

"Yes, sir—" and the tears welled to Guesse Bulard's eyes. "I have wept many times on hearing my kind, adopted father rehearse the pitiful scene of seventeen long years ago. Poor papa, what has he thought, on his return, to see our little home destroyed, and Peggy and I gone? I'll bet the Apaches will 'ketch it!'"

"Probably! As to old Jack's eccentric wife, there's something mysterious about her disappearance. The boys have searched high and low, but cannot find hide nor hair of her."

"If I did not know her well," replied Guesse, "I should entertain much anxiety for her safety, in such a case. But as the old hunters say, 'she's some on her muscle,' and I doubt not will fight her way out of the wilds!"

"I truly hope so. And now, ladies, I must go. I have already stayed long!"

Inez Murrillo burst into tears.

"Oh, Philip! perhaps we shall never meet again. If the Arapahoes carry us to their villages all will be lost. Oh! take us away—help us to escape in time to avert this terrible fate!"

"I would, God knows, Inez, if I could; but 'tis utterly impossible. I am bound by an oath—a horrible oath—which I must regard; and even were I to break it, 'twould be to no avail. The Demon's Staircase, which leads from this retreat, is swarming with armed and watchful savages. It was only by giving an overheard countersign that I was permitted to come up here at all."

"Then!" cried Nola Murrillo, "if you cannot serve us in one way, aid us in another. Send word of our whereabouts to my betrothed, Lieutenant Weslyn, at Fort Griffin, and he'll not be afraid to come to our rescue!"

"Indeed, Miss Nola, I cannot do even that. It would be an act of treachery to the league. In fact, I am powerless to do anything for you just at present!"

"Does this horrible Cloven-Hoof intend to sell me to the savages?" asked Guesse, thoughtfully.

"No, I believe not, though I have not heard him speak of you."

"Mr. Warren!" asked Nola, clutching him by the arm, anxiously, "tell me, truly; do you believe this mystery-enshrouded Cloven-Hoof to be more than a human, in disguise?"

"I do, and so does every member of our band—we are sworn to believe him a living envoy of the Old Nick. But, to tell you my solemn opinion, ladies, I am positive he is a beast possessed of human intelligence and powers of speech, even though his power may not be infernal. He is a hideous spectacle—a combination of man, buffalo, fish and Satan, and God grant you may be spared from ever seeing him."

"Do you see him often?"

"No. Very seldom, indeed; unless it is in the darkest of nights, when he leaves the ranch on a raid. In the daytime he remains in his majesty's royal chamber, or glides forth unwatched, and roams in the Phantom Forest."

At this juncture Guesse Bulard sprung from her seat, and sped toward the little crevice looking northward, that answered the double purpose of a door and window to the grotto. From this aerial retreat a magnificent view of the surrounding country could be had—a strange, wild and weird prospect it was.

Starting from the very bowels of the mountains, it seemed, and extending scores of miles to the north, was the straight and unswerving belt of timber that arose on each side of the old dry water-course. Plainly could be perceived from the grotto the spot where took place the remarkable division between the live and the dead forest—the green belt running far off toward the distant river, and the serpent of spectral gray rolling back into the depth of the hills.

Far off to the west from the grotto lay in plain view the "silent city" of Los Des Pumas, and the home of Nola and Inez Murrillo. Again, far away along the wooded water-course, were faintly discernible the dots of cottages and farm-houses of Zosel, in the north.

"What is it?" demanded Inez's lover, as the girl looked intently from the opening.

"See!" she replied, pointing toward where the dead and live forests met.

He came to the crevice and gazed out.

A company of horsemen had dismounted and were picketing their animals, while a single rider could be seen galloping rapidly off toward Zosel.

He was no other than Captain Chris, on his way to the village, to interview Colonel Alonzo Nesmit.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAMP IN THE WATER-COURSE—A FRIGHTFUL SPECTACLE.

SHORTLY after they were left by Captain Chris, the rangers held a short consultation, as to whether they should pitch camp down in the seam, that lay in front of them, or remain on the bank, above.

"I don't purtickle like ter be so low down in ther 'arth," observed old Jack, picking his fangs with a bowie-knife. "S'posin' 'Fash shed happun ter antelope erlong this way. They'd hev us in er trap, down thar."

"Yas" said the Leopard, reflectively; "but d'y'e see them thar m-l-s., off thar, tew der sou'?"

"I jedge I hain't blind; see d' m' heff an hour ergo."

Wat 'bout 'em?"

"Wal, I'll enlightnin' ye. Them thar discomberated heeps o' stun an' dart uster be ther ha'nts o' thet o' nery old skeeslyx, Joaquin. He galivanted erbout this kentry, afore he went up ter Kaliforny, an' got smothered! Now I've conseived ther ice thet our game, Mr. Kloven Huff, holds out thar, too, an' ef sich ar' ther kaise, he ken squint rite down into us, from them peaks. Tharfore, I argy we'd better git outen sight, inter ther gulch, an' risk ther 'Fash. We ken keep er guard posted on both sides, an' ef they diskiver enny bad signs, we kin sun ervackwate ther gulch, an' klime ter one side'r 'other!"

"Exactly. I don't keer a hoss either way; so go 'lang, an' do as ye think prackticable. You're boss—I'm lewteneent!"

So it was decided to camp in the water-course. But now a new difficulty presented itself.

The sides of the seam were so nearly perpendicular that the way to get down their horses was a puzzle; but when Jonathan Jeriah produced a couple of spades and as many picks, it was but the work of an hour to hew a narrow path slantwise down the hillside to the bottom of the valley.

Taking turns, of ten, the men worked with a will, and soon had a good road into the dry water-course; for the soil was loose, and easily heaved aside.

The horses and Artist Jerrold's vehicle were then piloted down the acclivity, and while old Jack set about constructing a rude lodge, for a lodging-house, the remainder of the band hewed another road up the opposite side of the gully. Then two guards were stationed, and long before sunset the camp was in resting order.

The next thing to consider was something to eat, and with a view to procuring something fresh in the way of meat, Life shouldered his rifle and set off into the Phantom Forest.

He had a great curiosity to know what there was of the place, and scarcely knowing the meaning of the word *fear*, he did not hesitate to take a stroll into the forbidding precincts.

It lacked nearly an hour of sunset when he left the camp, and he hurried along, keeping both ear and eye on the alert, and examining any hollow stubs of trees and fallen trunks that he imagined might be the residence of such game as the partridge, bear or woodchuck.

But, all to no avail. The dead timber creaked and groaned above and around him, and not a sign of life, either animal or vegetable, was to be found. Evidently a blight had fallen upon this portion of the remarkable belt—a blight that had destroyed the life of not only the great pines, but the grass and the animals who are ever to be found in the forests of the West.

The shadows of night had fallen over the land ere the sharp-eyed hunter was aware of it, and presently the great round moon soared up, and sent a weird flood of light in among the spectral pines.

With an impatient growl he checked his footsteps, and had decided to abandon the search and retrace the trail to camp, when his piercing gaze suddenly became riveted upon an object a dozen yards distant up the water-course. It was something that would not have attracted the attention of one man out of fifty—a single projection above a fallen log, like a crotched limb, full of little prongs.

But the longer the Leopard looked at it the more satisfied he became that it was not the log's branch—not a limb at all, but the antler of a deer.

"Celestial Singers!" he muttered, carefully cocking his rifle. "Mebbe I'm bigly schooled on thet ar objek, an' ergin mebbe I hain't. Howsumdever, I kin soon assertane. Ef et ar' er buck, I opine he'll oscorchulate on reasevin' thes!"

So saying, he picked up a good-sized pebble, and hurried it toward the log. Lo! and behold, it struck fairly and squarely against the projection.

Then, there was a wild snort, a bleat that sounded almost human, and a huge buck sprung to his feet and glared around him.

The next instant the sharp spang of a rifle broke the stillness; the noble animal made an attempt to spring away, but stumbled and fell in his tracks—dead!

The bullet had entered his right eye, and instant death ensued.

"Discomberfate my mental equilibrium tho'!" chuckled Life, triumphantly, "but didn't I transmoggery his terresivul gravitation, tho'? Whoop! yoop! won't I satisfactorily appease the yearnings o' my antelope-eatin' proclivities, tho', ter-night? You bet! and my proklastinashun shan't bekim perverbial, hyarafter, nuther."

Licking his chops at the thoughts of the future feast, he was about to advance toward the outstretched deer, when his eyes became fastened upon something so horrible further up the gulch—something so terror-inspiring and frightful that he remained rooted to the spot, and his knees began to knock together and his teeth to chatter.

Life Mackkay, or the Leopard, as he is better known, was a brave man, with not a grain of cowardice or superstition in his nature; and to-day I

doubt if you can find a rover of the wilderness, from Washington Territory to the Gulf of Mexico, who can so easily dispose of his weight in red-skins. But the sight he now saw was one well calculated to make the bravest of men quail with awe and dread, if not with terror.

From the spot where the deer had fallen, the southerly course of the gulch was very slightly up-grade, showing that the dried-up stream had probably run in the direction of the north.

Coming down this grade, and in plain view from where the Leopard stood, was the dread spectacle.

A buffalo of medium size, looking shadowy in the streaming moonlight, was ambling along, coming in the direction of the ranger's camp, and on his back, with the bridle-reins held loosely in his hands, was the *fiery human form of a man*, with a head the exact counterpart of the beast it bestrode, and feet like those of a young horse, but *cloven*!

A long, tawny mane swept over a bull-neck from the horned head, and a sickly, ghost-like yellow fire seemed to flame from every pore of the body.

The form from the waist to the hoofs was covered with fish-like scales, and these seemed to shed a silver luster of wonderful brilliance.

But this was not all the Leopard saw, by any means.

Behind the first frightful spectacle came a score of purely white stallions in a train, mounted with tall, headless figures of ghostly clad attendants, armed with gleaming lances.

All this, taken into consideration, and the great moon shedding her most spectral rays of light down through the grim towering pines, it was a scene to shake the nerves of the most lion-hearted man.

On came the phantom cavalcade, headed by the Demon Buffalo—on they came, and still the Leopard stood rooted in his tracks, staring directly ahead, his face whiter than the shrouds that enveloped the headless trunks of the approaching horsemen.

He could not move, could not speak, could do nothing but just stand there, and stare and tremble.

Nearer drew the ghostly cortege and their demon leader.

Then came a spasmodic jerk, a gasp, and the ranger found the power to use his limbs. It was enough!

With a wild, awful yell of righteous horror, that would have put to shame the lustiest screeching Comanche, he turned about and sped down the old water-course, giving frightful howls and shrieks at every leap, and never looking right or left until he dashed into camp, where his mates were sitting around a bright camp-fire, smoking their evening pipes.

As may be supposed, the precipitate advent into their circle of the thoroughly scared Leopard, caused considerable consternation among the rangers, and they as of one accord sprung for their rifles.

When Lije could check his fearful momentum enough to come to a halt he was a sad-looking sight. His face was like that of a corpse, his eyes bulged from their sockets, and he quaked and trembled in every joint.

"What'n ther devil's ther rip?" demanded old Jack, cocking his gun.

"What?" burst forth the Leopard, dashing the sweat from his brow—"what? Why, God above us, b'yees, ther ginnyswine Devil himself, rite erway down from hell an' purdishment, ar' er kummin'! Yas-an' ther hull reggymen o' his satanic imps 'n' pimps, ar' with him. Quick! all han's, hyar! Git ther 'osses up outen this gulch. Ther kussed ker-ryan 'll be on us, quicker'n a painter kin wiggle his tail!"

Seeing that something indeed was the row, the rangers set to work and hustled the animals up onto the bank above, followed by Jerrold and his "schooner." Then they lay low, at the edge, and waited. Presently Lije whispered:

"Look! b'yees—mity snuff-boxes, look! *Thar they kum a-yoopin'!* Oh! *Celestial Singers!*"

CHAPTER IX.

COLONEL NESMIT—ATTACKED.

We left Captain Chris in the parlor of the Nesmit hacienda, glaring at the moving eyes in the portrait before him.

Yes! they really *moved*—moved from something they had previously been gazing at, and glowered down upon the ranger once more.

"Great miracles," muttered Adams, scarcely knowing what to say or do; "this beats my reckoning. I never knew that pictures had movable optics before. Dash me, but I'll know the meaning of this, if I die for it!"

He drew a revolver from his belt and examined the cartridges.

While he was thus engaged, the eyes in the portrait *disappeared* for a single second, but when he glanced up, a pair of blue eyes were staring down at him. The ranger, however, did not notice the change.

Grasping his revolver in the left hand, and his long sharp-pointed knife in the right, he advanced close to the picture, narrowly watching the eyes. They seemed perfectly stationary, and did not move in the least.

Raising his right hand, Captain Chris made a motion as though he intended to bury the knife in the smiling face.

But the eyes did not stir. They were perfectly fixed and glassy in their stare.

Thoroughly exasperated, the ranger touched the pupil with his knife-point.

It came in contact with a hard substance of a flinty nature.

The eyes were glass!

With a baffled cry Chris staggered back to the chair he had previously occupied, and sunk down among the cushions white and faint.

Here was a second mystery which he had encountered during the day. First the strange conduct of the villagers, and now the mystery of the eyes. He was positive he had seen them roll around and fix their snakey gaze upon him.

Now they were nothing more or less than glass. What kind of optics did the Zosse-ites possess if they could withstand the jab of his knife and not wink at it? It was a mystery, indeed.

Adams was seriously cogitating over the plan of a renewed attack upon the offending portrait, when a man entered the parlor.

"Ha!" he said, advancing with a pleasant smile, and extending his soft, white hand—"Captain Adams, I believe, is it not?"

"Exactly," replied the ranger, cordially, "and you are Alonzo Nesmit?"

"The same. I have been looking for you; for the Lieutenant-governor wrote me you were on the way. So you think you have the courage to brave this mysterious Cloven-Hoof, eh?"

"I reckon if courage's all that's wanting, I've got a liberal allowance of the requisite!"

"That is good. Have you your men close at hand?"

"No. I left them at the line on the old water-course, between the dead and the live belt of timber, twenty miles to the south."

"The deuce, you did! Well, that is lucky. I should have sent you down in that direction, anyhow, had you all first come to Zosse!"

"Indeed! then do you think our work will be in that neighborhood?"

"I do. I am of the opinion that these "Vultures" have their rendezvous in the mountains, not far from the source of the water-course."

"How about this dried-up channel? Did ever a river flow therein?"

"So it is said. An Indian chief once told me that a stream called by them the Spirit River ran across the country, here. Then came the great shock of the legendary earthquake which killed Moseleiz,* and the river disappeared, escaping through some subterranean passage!"

"That is strange. Now, about these robbers? Have they made any recent raids in this vicinity?"

"Indeed, yes. A courier arrived to-day, with the news that the wily inhabitants of our neighbor town, Los Dos Pumas, have been lured from the village by a traitor, with a view to repelling a reported invading band of Yanks, and while absent, the Vultures swooped down on the place, and sacked it, also making captives of the *alcaldes*' two daughters!"

"Humph! that's bold. But do you know this *alcaldes* personally?"

"No! He is a Mexican, I believe, and having never met him, I do not know him—more, I do not want to!"

"Best not to be too intimate with a *Greaser*, that's so. I hate 'em like I do the red-skins—which, I judge, are the nobler of the two. Have these so-called "Vultures" ever made any attempts upon Zosse?"

"No! but we are momentarily expecting them. There are twenty prosperous ranches in this locality, and just at present every farmer has considerable money about him. Could the robbers obtain it all, theirs would be a rich harvest."

"Do you imagine they will be bold enough to make an open attack?"

"No, I think not. They do not come out boldly, or we should then be better able to protect ourselves. They swoop down on their victims when least expected, and so adroitly do they manage these raids, that they are rarely, if ever, seen."

"Humph! Now, colonel, there is one thing I would like you to explain to me?"

Whereupon the ranger related his experience among the villagers, and all about their singular reserve. As he concluded a dark scowl overspread the listener's face.

"I do not know how to account for it, Adams," he replied, huskily. "I, sometimes, am forced to believe that a larger share of those villagers are partial to the outlaws. If such is the case, and if by any way they know of your coming, and the purpose in view, they probably do not care to aid you any!"

"True. Then, I judge, it will be useless for me to try to raise any men, here. If all the villagers are in league with the robbers, matters are indeed assuming a serious aspect. Have other rangers than my band, ever tried to discover the outlaws?"

"No;—only one attempt has ever been made against them. That was when my son Alf, alone and unarmed, attempted to track them far up the water-course to the mountains."

"Your son?"

"Yes—or, that is, the child I have always called my son. He was thirty-five years old, the day he left on that fatal mission. Poor fellow! I would that I knew whether he is living now, or dead. He never returned. If he is living, Adams, the robbers have undoubtedly imprisoned him in their secret den. Your picture is a correct likeness of him—so if you should ever see him, do not strike him down!"

He pointed to the portrait.

Involuntarily the ranger gave a quick, searching glance at the eyes, but they were fixed perfectly stationary.

Then he compared the smiling, evil, Mexican face to that of Colonel Nesmit. There was no resemblance between the two. The colonel was purely an American, with an open, intellectual cast of countenance, calm brown eyes, and chestnut hair and beard. His age probably ranged between fifty and fifty-five, but,

* A sachem.

save a few wrinkles on his forehead, he did not show his age in the least. Surely the two were not father and son.

After conversing for about an hour longer, and obtaining all the information he deemed requisite, in the work before him, Captain Chris arose to leave.

"What! you do not intend to start for camp at this unseemly hour?" exclaimed the colonel.

"Yes, I feel that my presence may be needed with the band. Something tells me that there will be trouble soon, and if there is any fighting to do, I want to have a hand in it!"

"Well, if you must go, I will not try to hinder you, but I should be pleased to have you stop over until to-morrow. Do you propose to change the location of your camp?"

"No; or, that is, not that I know as yet. I shall probably remain there until something further turns up."

"Very well. If I learn aught that I think will prove advantageous to you, I may take a notion to ride over to your camp during the week."

"Do so. I shall be glad to see you. Here, you peon, bring me my horse."

The horse was soon forthcoming, and Captain Chris sprang into the saddle and galloped away.

He took a route through the flats that would presently bring him alongside the water-course, for he did not care to pass through the village. Night had already fallen, and the moon rose in all her splendor, so that the open country was almost as light as in daytime.

When he had left his rangers, Captain Chris had calculated on spending this night at the hacienda. But, since seeing those menacing human eyes in the portrait, something told him that it would not be best—that he had better escape from the place as soon as possible.

What was the mystery of the hacienda? Who was the owner of the snakey eyes which he was positive he had seen move?

Did Colonel Nesmit know nothing about it, or was he connected with the affair?

No; the keen-minded ranger could not believe him otherwise than a true and open-hearted man. Those were not his eyes, and he was, without doubt, ignorant that the eyes were not painted ones, instead of glass.

Pondering deeply on the subject as he dashed along, the chief soon reached the wooded banks of the channel, and turned his course to the south.

Like a pair of shadows, two men emerged from the cover and sneaked after him. When they had gained considerably on the unsuspecting horseman, and were within easy rifle-range, they both stopped in their tracks, raised their rifles, and fired.

Then, as the ranger's horse uttered a piteous scream and sunk upon the ground, the ruffians drew their revolvers and leaped forward.

CHAPTER X.

TROUBLE IN CAMP—THE NAVAJOES—A SCENE.

It was as the Leopard said.

Cloven-Hoof and his Phantom Cortege were coming into view, riding leisurely down the channel.

There were more than one pair of bulging eyes among the watchers on the banks above, as they saw the terrible spectacle advancing toward them; the frightful Demon Buffalo, wrapt in his sheet of fiery flame, and his ghostly train of spectral attendants bringing up the rear on their milky-white steeds.

"Saints from Serrokker!" gasped Bulard. "By my uncle's bones, I feel lolkie abscorchulatin'!"

"So do I," replied Lije, chatteringly.

"No! you must not allow fear to take root into your hearts!" commanded Jonathan Jeriah, who was now the coolest man in the crowd. "Cock your guns, all hands, and when you combination of art and wickedness get directly opposite, let 'em slide!"

With trembling fingers the gristly rangers drew back the hammers, and then waited for the right moment to come.

On came the cavalcade.

As they approached the foot of the road which led up from the bottom to the banks, the horrible thing on the buffalo's back drew rein, and glared directly up toward the white-faced rangers.

A screech of horror burst from their lips.

Then there came a ferocious snort from the Demon, and he urged his savage-looking steed directly ahead, followed by the Phantom Cortege.

They were coming up the road!

"Quick! for God's sake!" exclaimed the artist. "Pour in a volley!"

Every rifle was leveled and sighted, except the Leopard's. He had left that far up the water-course.

Snap! *The flash of the caps were the only answers to the trigger touch!*

The loads had been withdrawn!

A howl of baffled rage escaped the rangers, and they drew back out of sight for a moment, followed by an infernal chorus of blood-curdling shrieks from the spectators.

"Quick! your revolvers—are 'they too unloaded?" cried Jerrold.

An examination proved that they were intact.

"Now, then, take steady aim, and fire!" was the next command.

Once more they crept forward, and peered over into the channel.

To their unbounded surprise they perceived that the Demon Buffalo and his ghostly cavalcade had wheeled their steeds, and were galloping far off up the water-course; and in a moment more they disappeared entirely from view!

"Celestial Singers!" cried the Leopard, "they're gone, an' I'm kussed glad on't!"

"So'm I!" sighed Territory Tim, "I nevyar got skeered afore; but them orful critters n'arly frizzed me into ice!"

"Now," said old Jack, savagely, "I purpose thet we investigate one leetle matter, w'at stickles in my crop. Who wuthdroo ther loads from our rifles, I shed like ter inquire!"

"Yas—thet's ther queshtyun!" assented Alaska. "Sum skunkfyld krookydile did et, an' I opine thet same ain't fur off, nuther!"

"If you mean to insinuate on me!" said the artist, standing proudly erect, for he perceived that all eyes were turned upon him, "I embrace the opportunity to deny the assertion."

"I speculate t'ye ain't none ter gude ter do sich er thing," growled Jack.

"Nor are you, my friend," was the cool reply. "Like mine, your presence in this band is uninitiatory, and you're as much to be suspected as am I. It will be recollected that you were also alone with the stack of rifles, engaged in constructing yonder lodge while the remainder of this organization were delving in the soil at the opposite side of the gulch for the purpose of making a second road up to the banks above."

"Kuss ye—d'ye meen ter say I did ther job?" yelled old Jack, leaping to his feet and drawing a knife.

"Hyar! put thet up!" ordered Life, stepping between the two. "Jes' leevethes 'ere matter tull ther captain gits back. I'm transmoggerified ef I kno' w'ich on ye ter suspek. Let ther bizness rest, an' we'll keep our optecks peeled onter both on ye."

So the subject was dropped for the time being. It was decided that it would not be best to camp in the water-course again, so the rangers stretched themselves upon the bank and dropped asleep, leaving Grizzly Len on guard.

On the following morning Life the Leopard, and the colored member of the band, whom we have previously mentioned as Beeswax the Butte, started off up the water-course, to search for the buck whom the former had shot.

At the camp the remainder of the rangers amused themselves in various ways, some playing eucher, some lounging lazily on the grass, and others cleaning their guns. J. J. Jerrold busied himself with his photographic apparatus, and succeeded in taking several very creditable and praiseworthy views of the distant mountains and surrounding country.

Old Jack Bulard was sullen and uneasy. He did not bear the greatest degree of friendship for the artist, and now that he saw that he was himself watched more closely than was the former, he grew exceedingly "blue," about it. Jerrold, however, manifested no sign that he had thought the second time of the affair.

About noon considerable excitement was created by the discovery that a band of mounted Indians had sighted and were approaching the camp. But the surprise was not less when old Jack announced that it was a small reservation of Navajoes, and headed by his old friend, Stinging Wasp.

As among the band there were seen to be about a dozen squaws and children, it was rightly conjectured that they were not a hostile party, and consequently were allowed to come up unmolested.

As the chief drew rein, he sprang from his saddle and greeted old Jack with a hearty hand-shake.

"Whar ye bound fur, Wassup?" queried the latter, as he scanned the grim faces of the braves and squaws on horse.

"Ugh!" said the chief, proudly. "The Navajoes seek another home, deep in the wilderness. No like to be cooped up in the pale-face reservation. So leab um, and travel toward Mexico."

"Goin' ter try Greaser rashuns, eh? Wal, I hope ye'll like ther change. But w'at d'ye say ter kampf-in' down hyar er while, long w'l us?"

"Wagh! what ranger band here for?"

"Wal, I'll enlightnin' ye, ef ye'll onhoss yer kopories," was the reply.

And after the cavalcade, numbering some hundred braves and squaws, had dismounted, old Jack explained to the Navajoe the meaning of their presence so far from the scenes of their former operations, and all about the Demon Buffalo and his Phantom Cortège. After being offered for his services all the outlaw scalps he could take, Stinging Wasp finally consented to encamp in the vicinity, and assist in the capture of the robbers.

During the afternoon their horses were unpacked, and soon a couple of skin lodges were erected on the banks of the water-course.

The Navajoes had a great curiosity to see Jerrold's camera, and to their infinite delight the artist took a photograph of the whole crowd and presented it to the chief's really lovely daughter.

This token of friendship on the part of Jonathan was duly appreciated by the whole tribe, and he was presented with many beads and badges.

Among the party, there were several not bad-looking Indian girls, and the gristly old rangers began to spark them up with surprising earnestness.

Old Jack took in tow a buxom young squaw, and soon was entertaining her with stories of his various adventures and exploits in the mountains and on the wide plains.

The maiden listened with rapt attention, and seemed to admire her white companion more than she did the copper-colored knights of the moccasin. In fact, the two got along so fast together, that, just as the sun was setting romantically over the western horizon, Old Jack ventured to snatch a kiss from his dusky companion's lips. Few of the rangers saw this act, but what immediately followed, they all saw!

There was a wild shriek, and a female in tattered garments and with long, straggling hair, sailed out from the shadows and began to beat the scout over

the head with a formidable oaken cudgel without mercy.

"Kiss Injin gals, will ye, Jack Bulard? Make huv ter red squaws, will ye, w'en yer poor wife, Peggy, ar' w'out hum n' friends? You miser'ble old buzzard, you reptyle, you snake, you desatful coyote, take that! an' that! an' that!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE LEOPARD'S TERRIBLE RIDE.

AFTER leaving the camp in the morning, Life and Beeswax made their way cautiously down the water-course, and in the course of an hour came to the spot where the Leopard had shot the deer on the previous night.

But they were doomed to disappointment. The deer was gone.

Doubtless Cloven-Hoof and his crew had seen fit to appropriate so valuable a prize to their own use.

"Celestial Singers!" ejaculated Life, much chagrined at the loss; "I'll be teetotally transmoggerified ef ther kusses hain't abductud my pill-box, too. I left et lyin' hyar, w'en I lit out fur kampf, an' now she's gone. Blast me fur er buzzard, but I orter kno'd better nor thet! Now, I'm minus my gun, an' ther's not ernuther n' kampf ter spar'. It's er stiff fix, I call et!"

Beeswax laughed heartily.

"M'aps dat you find de gun up in de robber camp," he suggested, brilliantly.

"Yas—I speckillate ye're plum thar, but whar in ther name o' ther twenty-seven consterlashuns o' stars, d'ye hev an' Ijee thet ar'?"

"Bress me; I dunno no more'n de blackest piccanniny in de world! S'pec's deyam in de mountings, dar, dough. S'posin' we gwine up dat way, Elijer?"

"Dat war jes' w'at I was roaminatin' on," said the Leopard, reflectively. "Reck'n we will go! Jes' ginerate et thr'u' yer kernoodleum, Beeswax: s'posin' we war ter find ther outlaws, an' smotch ther demon buffler? Why! Celestial Singers, niggur, we'd be ther dumkussedest fellers, from ther equater ter ther gulf o' Slickery! Fur one, I'm 'greed ter try an' bustificate them imp's o' brimstun, an' now's ther peerioddikal minnit ter begin opperashuns!"

"All right! Dat sutes dis chip o' stobe-polish, Life, so gwy ahead, dar, an' dis chille'll stick clusser to you dan Sorgum 'Lasses to a nigger's heel!"

"K'reet! Kim along then, an' we'll purreed ter expurate thes chann'll!"

Leaping over the fallen log, the Leopard followed the plain trail of horses' feet, which had been made by the animals of the Phantom Cortège, and the darkey followed him.

"Wus you ebber in dis region afore, Elijer?" questioned the latter, as they tramped along.

"Reckon not," was the reply, as the addressed took a bite from a plug of "compressed weed;" "but thet don't signify thet I hain't bin most everywhar else on thes terrestshul deposit o' grannit an' alkali. Celestial Vocalists, yes; reckon as how I hev. Kno' every krook an' corner in Iderhoo, Collaraddo, Montany, 'Laska, Kallerforny an' Oregon; besides, I hev er geograffical jeece o' Washington Terrortory, 'Braskey, an' ther Jumplin' off place. But w'en ye kum ter ther States! Transmoggerify me inter a hand-made brick, ef I ain't thar!"

"D'ye ever hear me discuss on ther time w'en I an' Circus Pete tuk a trip thr'u' ther States, eh? Wal, we hed volcanes o' fun. 'Twar the fall arter General Canby got smotchod, an' ther gang hed tuk in konsider'ble scrip, so thet we all full like kaster-ile posy-blossums; an' I an' Circus made up our minds to take er gallyvant out East. Circus he hed some relashun out thar somewhar, but we nevyar got a peeper on 'em. Arter weeks o' travel, we fetched up in Washington."

"Oh! niggur, I jes' wish ye mought've bin thar, an' seen ther recepshun thet war tandered us! Fustly, up comes President Grant, an' invites us ter his cabernet shop—I b'leve he called et, an' the way he did set 'em up, war a predickshun! Wine an' segars by ther hoss-load, an' he told us ter not be dainty, but help ourselves. He sed he'd heerd tell on us more'n onct, an' he honerd us fur our grit. He sed, tell Capten Chris ter acksept on his best respects, an' vote fur 'im next 'leckshun!"

"Wal, we drunk up thirty gall'ns o' his kertyobby, an' smoked sevral yee'ds o' hes consious, an' then started fur our lodgin'! Oh! Beeswax, you orter seen us! Ther turkey-buzzard nevyar see'd daylite thet ever got any fuller, nor war me an' Circus. We were jes' d'illin', an' sloppen' over on ther sides. Celestial Singers! but didn't we weeve wuss nor er orkas-berry in fly-time, tho'?"

"Ther next day, Nelly—thet war ther President's darter; yes, an' ther same 'un w'at married Saleratus, ther Britisher;—she kim down w' her faton, an' tuk me n' Circus out er ridin'." Oh! heavings! but warn't we two fellers as green as peed'ly unyuns, sittin' down thar on both sides on sech er purty peece o' femerine gander! G'ess so! Ye c'uld've smotchod us w' er koyote's paw!"

At this juncture they had reached the crest of the little slope in the channel, and could see that it now ran on as level, as in the vicinity of the rangers, camp.

Scarcely any light penetrated the deep place, except from occasional rifts in the tree-tops overhead, but this was not sufficient to permit the two men seeing very far in advance. Silence seemed to reign over all nature. Not a sound save the foot-falls of the rangers.

The spectral pines stretched their naked branches up against the calm bluesky.

The Leopard kept doggedly on, peering about on every side, and Beeswax brought up the rear.

For hours the two men kept on, and still the old water-course stretched off like a serpent before them. It was gradually rising in grade, however,

and Life entertained some hopes of reaching the end, before long.

About sunset Beeswax suddenly came to a dead halt.

"Sh—!" he motioned, to the Leopard; and then pointing ahead through the gloom he continued: "Look, Elijer, look! Golly; d'ye know w'at dat am'?"

The ranger uttered a low exclamation.

"Transmoggerify me inter er Senator," he whispered, excitedly. "Ef thet ain't er buffler—the same krittter w'at ther Deemen rid!"

It was indeed so. Lying contentedly down on the sand, about thirty yards above them, and munching away at a pile of freshly gathered grass, was the savage-looking steed of the mysterious Cloven-Hoof.

As the watchers' eyes became accustomed to the light centered around the beast, they perceived that he was bridled, as on the previous night, and that there were no persons in the immediate vicinity.

"What am de best t'ing to do?" inquired Beeswax, peering sharply around, lest he should be surprised by the terrible owner of the buffalo.

Life reflected several moments, seriously; then a wild dare-devil light crept into his eyes, as he replied. "Ye stay hyar, an' continny the s'arch, niggur, an'—!" here he began to tighten his belt.

"W'at'n de debbil you gwine to do?"

"Wal, jes' ye stay hyar, as I tole ye, an' I'll show ye, presently. I'm goin' ter ride thet buffler down ter camp!"

Beeswax put up his hands in surprise and horror, but the daring ranger was creeping away, ere he could express himself.

No difficulty was experienced by the Leopard in approaching the beast. He had evidently been thoroughly tamed, and did not even arise until Life seized him by the bits, and gave his mouth a fierce jerk. Then he sprang nimbly upon his back, just as the steed leaped to his feet with a snort of anger. From that instant began a wild and ludicrous race.

Off leaped the novel steed at a fearful speed, directly after poor Beeswax, who, not relishing the situation, had turned his toes toward camp, and was "leggin' it" for dear life.

On plunged the buffalo with terrific snorts, and on leaped Beeswax like a frightened rabbit.

The Leopard tried in vain to moderate the speed of his war-horse; but Mr. Buffalo seemed determined on overtaking and trampling down the African! On—on—on, and the gravel and sparks flew from in under their feet, and the snorts of the bull and the terrified yowls of Beeswax, made the welkin ring.

Skillful equestrian though he was, Life was not at home on the buffalo's back, and it was only by the most strenuous efforts that he retained his position by clinging to the long hair of the animal's neck. To fall from the buffalo's back, at the speed they were now going, would only be to meet instant death.

On—on—on, and still the pursuer and pursued kept about the same distance apart—Beeswax desperately determined not to give up while there was a ghost of a chance, and the buffalo bent on trampling him to pieces.

If there was one among the trio who suffered more than another, that same was the Leopard. He had flattered himself that he would have a glorious gallop back to camp, but it failed, just now, to meet his expectations.

Every tremendous leap of the infuriated bull, bounced poor Life into the air like a rubber ball. Every bounce elicited an unearthly groan, which, together with the snorts of the buffalo, and the yelps and shrieks of Beeswax, made the din to rival Pandemonium.

On—on—on, and mile after mile flew by. It is unnecessary to say that Life, as well, probably, as the bull, was amazed at the singular endurance of the African. His strength and wind must have been superhuman.

On—on, and the Leopard saw that they were nearing camp. In an instant he set up a series of frantic screeches, which, combined with those of Beeswax, soon brought the whole camp to the edge of the banks, above.

"Stop us!" shrieked Life, white with terror and exhaustion; "stop us! stop us! Cuss our foolish picters, hyar we kim er-bormin'!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE MEXICAN ALCALDE—PURSUED.

"BIMSTIFFEROUS brimstun!" cried Circus Pete, as he and his companions, on the elevated banks, saw the buffalo come tearing down the channel, with the Leopard clinging to his back, and Beeswax bounding along in advance. "Thar kums my pard! B'il't ows an' frickased mud-turks, but thet ar' a powerful bad fix!"

The rest of the rangers had gathered at the verge, as had also all of Stinging Wasp's party—an expression of amusement on each and every face. The situation was seen at a glance to be hazardous, but so ludicrous was the whole affair, that the smile soon became a roar of laughter, which echoed far and wide.

There were two, however, who perceived that the race would not terminate without serious results, if something was not speedily done. These were Circus Pete and Jerrold, the artist.

"Quick!" exclaimed the latter, excitedly, as he cocked his gun. "Some one of you fellows hurl a lasso over the head of the Leopard. The moment he is dismounted, I will agree to dispatch you beast. I can fetch him to the ground, I opine."

Circus Pete heeded the words, and in a moment disengaged the coiled lariat from his belt.

On came the infuriated bull, and as he came nearly opposite where the rangers stood, Pete hurled his lasso downward; and, as at this moment, the Leop-

ard straightened bolt upright, the noose settled gracefully around him, and drew taut.

The next moment he was jerked to the ground, stunned and bleeding, while the report of the artist's rifle broke the silence, which had for the instant ensued. The buffalo gave a few more maddened snorts and plunges after Beeswax, who had succeeded in reaching the road leading up the bank; then the beast staggered blindly about, fell upon his knees, toppled over, and his life-blood dyed the sandy bottom of the channel.

A yell of admiration from the Navajo braves now rent the air, and a rush was made to the river-bed.

The buffalo was found to be quite dead. Jerrold's bullet had reached him, just back of the shoulder, and ended his mad race, quickly.

Though considerably bruised by his fall, Life was not seriously injured, and soon recovered enough to relate his and Beeswax's experience.

The latter was so exhausted from the effects of his remarkable foot-race, that he was unable to speak for several hours; but, in the meantime, Life discoursed sufficiently for both, so that nothing was lost.

The Leopard was considerably surprised to meet Stinging Wasp, for he had not seen him since their trapping expedition up along the Niobrara, two years before.

But he was more surprised, and not a little amused, at what he saw in a retired nook of the camp—old Jack Bulard, sitting upon a fallen tree, staring, with the most singular melancholy and meekness, upon the ground. His head was bandaged up with strips of bloody cloth, and portions of his stubby beard had vanished.

By his side, with a grim, triumphant expression upon her deeply-marked countenance, sat a female, whose costume, not the most dainty fabric, was torn and raveled into shreds. By her side lay a ponderous cudgel; and, the presence of this, and the condition of Jack's cranium, told the Leopard only too plainly that "clubs had been trumps!"

"Hullo thar, Jack!" he hailed, lighting his pipe in the meantime. "I sw'ar, ye're a sad-lukin' critter. Look's if ye'd be'n in er scrimmage wi' er mountain devil—do, by thunder! Who be the femmine-gander w'at's squattin' long wi' ye? Hain't bin gittin' hitched ter 'n Injin gal, hev ye?"

"No, he ain't, thank ye!" vociferated the woman, springing to her feet and snatching up the cudgel, "so ye needn't insinuate, ye beast—ye sneak! Thar hain't one dipperful o' Injin blood 'bout me, an' I kin lick ther dirty heethun that sez that it ain't so. I'm Peggy Aramyntha Bulard, this 'ere desolate hippertumasses lawfoolly wedded wife, an' he's bin kissin' red-skin-pot-wras'lers! Oh! you wretch! you hyperbolical rimoser! you skunk! you lizzard! you conglomerated chunk o' carryon! jes' let me git ye hum; then, won't I dress ye out, tho'? Won't I, tho'? Oh! I'll larn ye ter leave yer hum, an' wife, an' darter, an' elope wi' these Injin barbarities! I'll larn ye, I will!"

And after administering three more raps upon Jack's head, that elicited as many howls, she took her position beside him once more, and peace ensued.

The evening was spent in planning, and conversing about the supposed Phantom Cortège and Cloven-Hoof.

It was proposed to sit up all night and watch for the Phantom Cavalcade, and make up for their loss of sleep on the following day. Besides Captain Chris was momentarily expected, as he had said he would be back by that night.

But, the long hours passed away, and the beautiful sun once more replaced the light of the moon—a calm morning dawned, and still the captain did not come; neither had a sight been seen or a sound heard of the spectral band.

"Et's quare why ther capten don't kim!" observed Old Jack, to the Leopard. "I hev got er consarned preedlickshun 'bout me, that tells me sumthin' he's happened ter him!"

"I don't loike ther squint o' ther matter, mysel'," was the reply, as the ranger searched the country in the direction of Zossel, with his field-glass. "Howsumdevyer, we'll remain hyar yet ter-day, an' ef sumthin' don't turn up, as MacClubber sez, we'll antelope over ter that p'int o' their kumpuss, an' circkumnavigate ther investigatin' committer. I opine we'll behold ther boss bowlin' over thes way 'fore long, tho'!"

But in this conclusion the Leopard was wrong. The forenoon passed, and still young Adams did not return.

The broiling sun had now reached the meridian, compelling the rangers to seek the cool shadows of the deep channel for comfort.

Jonathan Jeriah, however, bade defiance to the glaring rays, and drove *La Belle* and his schooner several miles off to the south, to find subjects worthy of photographing.

During the afternoon a company of a dozen horsemen were seen approaching, and the rangers made ready to receive them, were they friend or foe.

As they dashed up, they were found to be a band of well-mounted and well-armed Spanish-Mexicans, under the *alcade* of Los Des Pumas, Murrillo.

"Good-morning," said the latter to Life, as he doffed his sombrero.

"Gud-artenoon!" replied the Leopard, coolly. "How en thunder ar' ye indetted ter us fur thes interview?"

The *alcade* smiled, but continued, all the same:

"Nice day!"

"Bewtchful," was the response.

"Independent rangers, eh?"

"I reckon!"

"Well, then, I'm glad it has been my good fortune to meet you. Your mission here is for the purpose of

unraveling the mystery of the terrible Cloven-Hoof, eh?"

"I jedge."

"I thought as much."

Then, in a few words, the *alcade* related the circumstances connected with the swoop of the Vultures down upon Los Des Pumas, and the abduction of his two daughters.

"Wal," said the Leopard, when he had concluded, "w'at's thet got ter do wi' us, I shed loike to 'quire'."

"This!" was the reply. "I have found a way by which I can penetrate the den of these Vultures, but my forces are not strong enough to permit of such a move. By consolidating your formidable band with mine, the number on our side would exceed that of the robbers, and we can clean them out; you can earn your reward, and I can recover my stolen daughters!"

"Yas—I perceive," answered the Leopard, grimly.

"Ole hoss, d'ye see thes road hyar w'at leads down inter ther channel, an' thet t'other 'un w'at leads up onter ther other banks yander?"

"Yes; I see the newly-made passes, sir. What about them?"

"Wal, thet's 'bout ther quickest way ye ken git ercross, an' av'degittin' riddled wi' ca't-ridges!" was the cool reply.

"What do you mean?" demanded the *alcade*, suspiciously.

"I mean that I, ther redowbterble Life ther Leopard, do guv ye an' yer Greaser band, 'bout ther length on er koon's tale, ter absconchulate—cl'ar out—stretch sinews—me'sure terrestyel gravitytation, etc! etc!"

"What! you do not intend to show hostility to us?"

"Sha'n't say ernuther syllybull, Greaser, 'cept thet ef ye don't make yersel' rare, hyar 'bout, in side o' ther wiggle o' er mother-in-law's lip, my b'yees 'll not be holdable fur enny accident, w'at 'll be sure ter foller. We don't over well loike Greasers, an' seel'n we've bin w'out a big meal, fur nigh on for er week, our cannibalistic proclivities hev bin whetted up, on er left-handed whetstone, so I'd speculate ye'd find er hellth'er locality-ty, whar ye cum from!"

At a word the *alcade* ordered his followers to cross to the other side of the water-course, for he perceived that the rangers were ready to do the Leopard's bidding, and should he refuse, a general fight would ensue, which must eventually be attended with a loss of life.

So one by one the horsemen filed down the crumbling path, into the channel, for it was dangerous for two to attempt to go abreast; and soon half of the number were evenly distributed along down, leaving Murrillo and the other half above.

It was at this instant that a prolonged yell drew the attention of every man, to the south—along the course of the channel.

A man mounted upon a bony sorrel horse was spurring madly down upon the camp, yelling and gesticulating wildly.

It was Jerrold, the artist, on the back of his *La Belle*—coming on, furiously on. Far away behind him, could be seen the deserted "schooner," from which he had disengaged his scrawny horse, to facilitate his speed.

On—on, he came, and struck dumb with astonishment at the sight, the rangers stood motionless, and watched him approach.

Not so with Conales Murrillo.

He started and grew deathly pale, as he beheld the wild rider, and clutched at his rein, nervously.

"Never mind me," he fairly hissed, to his men, "but go on 'cross, and flee for Los Des Pumas. I will—ay, must go the other way!"

Unnoticed, then, he turned his horse stealthily toward the north, and was well out of rifle range ere the rangers became aware of his escape. Then, he drove the spurs deep into his animal's quivering flesh, and dashed away.

On—on, came Jerrold, his scrawny mare fairly flying over the ground, and making the sparks fly at every bound.

On—on, he sped, dashing furiously past the camp, and on after the fugitive, never allowing his eyes to leave the object of the mad pursuit. On, on, and soon both pursuer and pursued were hidden from view at the camp, by a depression in the lay of the broken country.

Wildly, determinedly on did the terror-stricken *alcade* urge his already jaded horse, but the artist gained upon him, constantly.

It was fully five miles yet, to the only place where a crossing over the channel could be effected.

Three miles whistled by.

If he could only reach the "ford," the Mexican knew he could evade his pursuer, and gain an opportunity to use his rifle.

Two miles yet intervened, however, and his beast was dripping with froth and foam, while he stumbled at every leap, and then the artist gives vent to a triumphant yell as the distance lessens between him and his enemy.

Far away looms up a lone cottonwood tree, which marks the ford. But, ha! look!

From this direction now appears another horseman, coming south. With a horrible imprecation, Murrillo wheels his horse to the north-east, hoping to avoid a meeting. But the new-comer also varies the course of his animal, to head him off. Directly in the rear are heard the thundering hoof-strokes of *La Belle*, and the cries of the artist. Capture is inevitable between the two foes, the fugitive perceives, and shifting his position so that he faces Jerrold, he unsings his rifle, and brings it to bear.

But, at this instant, his exhausted beast stumbles, falls upon its knees, regains its feet again, by a fierce effort, stumbles once more, and then goes crunching

down to the earth, precipitating the doomed rider heavily upon the rocks in front, stunned and bleeding!

CHAPTER XIII.

BEFORE THE VULTURE COURT—SOLD.

ERE Captain Chris could disengage himself from the saddle, as his dead horse sunk upon the ground, the two ruffians were upon him, and in a moment had him overpowered and disarmed. After that it took but a short time to bind him, hand and foot, with stout buffalo cords.

"Devils!" cried the surprised ranger, "what means this outrage?"

"It means that you are my prisoner," said one of the men, looking down into the captive's face with a hideous leer. "Do you know me?"

Captain Chris eyed him a moment; then the vision of the portrait in Nesmit's hacienda rose before him. It was the same as the face bent toward him now—this was the son of the colonel!

"You are the son of Alonzo Nesmit, are you not?" he asked.

"The same. I am the noble fellow he told you he believed to be a captive among the Vultures. Ha! ha! ha!"

"But why do you laugh? How know you he told me so?"

"Because I overheard him!"

"Then it was you who owned the human eyes in the picture?"

"Exactly! I own the same peepers you would have jabbed your knife into. But fortunately I had a pair of glass substitutes ready!"

"How did you get behind that portrait?"

"There is an alcove just behind it, opening into a disused passage. I take liberty to use this when I see fit to spy upon the old gent!"

"Indeed! Well, what do you propose to do with me, now that like two brigands you fellows have secured me?"

"Any more questions you'd like to ask, boss?" was the sarcastic answer.

"Yes—when you reply to my last."

"Wal, I guess we haven't any more time to converse at present, so inhale a little of this perfumery, and then we'll jog along toward the 'Vulture Castle,' where his infernal majesty, Cloven-Hoof, is waiting to see you."

So saying, the outlaw took a sponge which his companion had in the meantime saturated with chloroform, and held it close to the ranger's nose. Though he did not yield without a struggle, he soon gave in to the seductive influence of the powerful drug; and for many long hours thereafter he was unconscious.

When he awoke it was with a violent start, and he found himself in a mighty cavern, and the witness of a strange scene—a scene that soon caused him to chafe under the restraint in which his bonds placed him.

He was lying on a bench, or sort of rudely-constructed table, and from the position in which he lay could command a view of the whole interior of the cavern.

It was a monster chamber, some forty feet long by thirty wide, and as many feet in height, and was, from all appearances, hewn out of the soft limestone rock by human hands.

There was no visible mode of egress or ingress, and it would seem a mystery how man or beast could be here in the bowels of the earth.

Directly opposite, but some twenty feet from where the ranger lay, rose a large dais, on which was mounted a box-like affair, resembling a pulpit. Before this pulpit were a dozen camp-stools, and upon these sat as many white-robed figures, headless, to all appearances.

At a further end of the council-room sat a dozen Indians, whose hair and crowns proclaimed them to be chiefs.

Captain Chris regarded the scene about him with exceeding interest. He judged that something of importance was about to take place, but what it was he could not for the moment imagine, and he secretly wondered what disposition was to be made of him.

Presently there was heard the tinkle of a bell, and to his surprise and horror he saw the head and neck of a buffalo rise above the top of the pulpit, and the glaring eyes gaze around the apartment.

At the same instant while Adams was staring at the frightful object in front of him, a party of four persons entered the council-chamber and drew nigh to the pulpit.

One was the man who had been with Nesmit at the time of the ranger's capture. The other three were females—the Murrillo sisters, and Guessie Bulard.

Captain Chris gave a low cry as he caught a glimpse of the maiden's face.

"Guessie! Guessie!" he exclaimed.

She turned at sound of his voice, and then as she saw him, came bounding to his side, with a glad light in her beautiful eyes.

"You here, Kit?" she cried, stooping over and kissing his pallid lips.

"Yes, darling—it would seem so. But what means it all? Who is yonder beast behind the pulpit, and what is he going to do with you?"

"It is the terrible Cloven-Hoof," replied the girl, casting a shuddering glance toward the Demon Buffalo, "and he is about to sell us to those Indians yonder, for horses and skins!"

Captain Chris groaned aloud.

"Is there no way you can free me?" he gasped. "Once let me get on my feet, Guessie, and I could lick the whole crowd, you Satanic curse included!"

Guess was about to reply when she was seized roughly by the arm and hurried back to where Inez and Nola were standing.

With feverish interest the ranger watched and listened.

The three girls were drawn up in front of the pulpit, and then their outlaw guard withdrew a short distance.

For the space of several moments not a sound was heard in the great cavern. The figures in white before the pulpit were motionless; the Indians at the further end of the cavern ceased their jabbering, and silence reigned supreme.

Presently the thing behind the pulpit gave an initiatory snort, and then the following words, in a deep, rumbling voice, rolled forth:

"The time is at hand when the fifth monthly session of the infernal order of 'Vultures' shall take place, providing the Spirit Brotherhood are prepared for the points to be discussed and argued, for the mutual advantage of the most high order. Are the Spirit Jurors all in readiness?"

There was a heavy rumbling sound like the muttered growls of thunder, accompanied by hisses as of lightning flashes, all seeming to emanate from the rock beneath the seats of the silent white-robed figures. The many torches in the cavern appeared to flare up brighter, and a pungent odor of burning brimstone pervaded the close atmosphere.

The figure behind the pulpit soon gave a commendatory snort, and resumed:

"The Spirit Jurors are wise. They are ever ready for the Grand Council, and therefore they please the great Satanus. Before the Brotherhood, to-day, stand three creatures of the feminine sex, who were captured by the majestic order recently, and presented to their Ruler. But, though he is greatly pleased at the gift of his esteemed servants, Satanus has no use for women, and has therefore offered them for sale or in exchange for ponies to the chiefs of the Arapahoes.

"Several of the same are now present in the Royal Court. Let them come forward, and state the sums they would extend for the possession of the pale-face maidens."

At this juncture the Indians in the further end of the cavern drew near, and gazed at the shrinking girls.

At last, one burly chief fixed his gaze upon Guess, and a gleam of admiration flared up into his eyes.

"Ugh!" he grunted, seizing her by the arm. "Storm-cloud, he big chief. Thirty lodges in him village by Fox creek. He gib ten horses fur dis squaw."

A roar of dissent seemed to come up from the bowels of the earth.

ASTOUNDED at this answer to his proposition, Storm-Cloud sneaked back, and another red-skin took his place.

"Metomula great chief," he said, proudly, "an' got heap hoss. He gib hundred hoss for t'ree squaw. Ugh!"

"Me gib hundred and one hoss for t'ree squaw," bid the next.

"Me gib hundred and ten hoss!" cried the next, bound to outbid his brothers.

So the bidding went on, after a lively fashion, until a hundred and fifty horses were offered for the three trembling young girls, when the eleventh chief took the stand, a disdainful smile upon his stolid face.

"Ugh!" he said, with a gesture of disgust toward the other reds—"dey no good. Big Rogue much big chief. He been to Great City, an' see Big Father. He got many horses. De squaws must be his. He gib two hundred horses!"

A cry of rage went up from the ten listeners.

"Wagh!" sneered Storm-Cloud, "Big Rogue big sham! He only got hundred hoss. Where he git de odder hundred? Ugh!"

"Slead um!" was the reply, delivered in such a seriously comical way, that even the Spirit Jurors could not restrain a laugh.

"Good!" nodded the Cloven-Hoof, from behind his pulpit, with an approving snort. "Is there any of the worthy chiefs, now, who wish to increase the bid?"

"There is," said the twelfth savage, stepping forward. "Sky-Rocket is not an Arapaho chief, but a chief of the mighty Apache nation, who are on friendly terms with the Vultures. He will offer three hundred ponies for the white squaws!"

"Sky-Rocket is a brick," said the Demon Buffalo, with a snort intended to declare his satisfaction.

"Now will the other chiefs raise him on that?"

The Arapahoes shook their tufted heads sullenly, and retreated to the further end of the cavern.

"Very well," decided Cloven-Hoof. "The pale-face girls are Sky-Rocket's. Whenever he wishes to depart I will furnish him with animals to carry them to his village. Also will I send two men to bring back the three hundred ponies."

"The Great Ruler is wise. At the rise of the next sun, Sky-Rocket will start for his village in three days distant, and he must return to his people. But he has yet another dozen horses to spare, and will give them to the great Cloven-Hoof for yonder captive pale-face dog."

Cloven-Hoof retired behind his pulpit for a moment, doubtless to reflect. But he soon reappeared, and gave his customary initiatory snort.

"Spirits of the Infernal Order," he said, "you have heard the words of the Apache chief. Are you or are you not opposed to the acceptance of his offer?"

There was again heard the rumbling as of distant thunder, which was succeeded by spiteful hisses; then all was silence.

"They have no objections to the offer," said Cloven-Hoof, addressing the chief. Then turning to the

outlaw, who had ushered in the maidens, he continued:

"You, Aspero, go at once to the band, and tell them of the offer we have had for the pale-face ranger, whose camp lies at the further end of the Phantom Wood. Also, tell them to rejoice and drink freely over the fortunately high disposal of the girls, which will net each member a good round sum!"

Aspero bowed low, and in a moment more was gone, having left the great chamber through a fissure in the wall.

It was several minutes ere he returned, and during this time a strange silence pervaded the cavern. Captain Chris was waiting anxiously for the answer which was to decide his fate. He knew that if he was taken along with the maidens to the Apache village, he might hope to make his escape. But if, on the contrary, he was not, either a horrible death or an endless imprisonment awaited him.

Suddenly Aspero came bounding back into the chamber, white and breathless.

"The boys say dispose of the ranger as you choose!" he cried—"but, captain, you are wanted at the Ranch. The member known as King of the Hills, is gone!"

"Curses upon him!" roared Cloven-Hoof, savagely. "Here, you Sky-Rocket; you remain till I return! The scout shall be yours."

In an instant the Demon Buffalo had vanished behind his pulpit, and Aspero also had disappeared through the fissure.

Then, quickly approaching Captain Chris, Sky-Rocket whispered:

"Sh—!" Keep quiet. I am a friend!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RANCH—LITTLE FERRET'S DEPARTURE.

LET us follow in the tracks of the mysterious Cloven-Hoof.

Directly behind his pulpit was a trap-door opening down through the floor of the dais. After disappearing from the view of the prisoners, the stranger being pulled up the door, and a dark, narrow staircase, hewn out of the solid rock, was revealed.

Following this in its downward course, he presently came to a large apartment, similar to the council-chamber above, and which was dimly lit by a smoking torch, thrust in a crevice.

In this cavern were a number of casks and barrels strewn about; also several fire-places, over which hung monster caldrons, were set in the rocky sides of the wall. The further, or northern end, was piled to the roof with well-filled bags, while in the center of the room stood a tall cask, set on end, which somewhat resembled a generator.

There were no persons to be seen about the premises; and so, after casting a searching glance about him, Cloven-Hoof directed his footsteps toward the eastern end of the cavern, where a natural door opened out upon a large, level plateau.

From here a marvelous and strikingly beautiful view could be had, of a strange and weird scene. Below the plateau, some thirty feet, was a large, circular basin or mountain-looked valley, where some forty acres of land lay as smooth and level as on the great plains. All around towered giant walls of cold gray rock, rising up in perpendicular bodies until they seemed to touch the blue vault of heaven.

Not a visible mode of egress from this strange valley was to be seen, nor were there signs of the previous communication of its inhabitants ever with the outside world. Nothing but a wilderness of mountain, rose like the walls of a living tomb on either side. Directly opposite the plateau, on the further side of the basin, towered a frowning peak, higher by many feet than its neighbors. Commencing at its base, in the valley, and ascending gradually upward, was to be seen a spiral staircase, which apparently had been so formed by the great chisel in the wondrous hand of Nature. This staircase led to the mountain grotto, where once before we have journeyed with the reader.

Down in the valley was a scene as strange as the one presented by the towering mountain—a scene suggestive of the retreat of the mountain outlaw.

A large, long, barn-like cabin, built partly of logs and partly of adobe nestled down in the center of the basin, and around this grazed some fifty snow-white ponies. Here and there were flitting the forms of men attired in the garb of the mountaineer, while at the door of the ranch, as the cabin was called, were huddled together a motley assemblage of as coarse-featured, evil-faced desperadoes as ever cursed the frontier with their presence.

Pouring down with a musical roar from the southern end of the valley, as it came leaping on its downward flight over the majestic mountain crags, dashed a mighty cascade, the volume of whose foaming and seething waters coursed northward across the level bottom, and disappeared again through a black aperture in the great wall of rock. Drawn up on shore near the cabin was a raft of logs, a flatboat and several canoes.

As Cloven-Hoof appeared upon the plateau, above the basin, a man left the group by the cabin-door, and advanced within speaking distance.

"What is this I hear about the desertion of the King of the Hills?" demanded the Demon Buffalo, giving vent to a horrible bellow and an angry stamp of his cloven foot.

"Your majesty," replied the spokesman, "it is indeed true. The member of our gang, you allude to, cannot be found. One of our canoes is gone, and doubtless the traitor has long since escaped."

"When was he seen last?"

"Yesterday, your majesty—an hour before the company of chiefs arrived."

"Who towed the red-skins' canoe up through the gorge?"

"Myself, your majesty!"

"How many were there of them?"

"Twelve, your majesty."

"Well, this is strange. You are sure that Warren is not in the valley?"

"Yes, your majesty. We missed him, but thought nothing of his absence, because we thought you might have him in the Vulture court. But when Aspero said, just now, that he was not there, we began to suspect that he had deserted."

"And, what do you imagine is his object? Where has he gone?"

"I know not, your majesty, unless it be to the rangers' camp at the end of the Ghost Forest."

"Ha! yes. There he has probably gone. I did not think of it, before. He doubtless intends to lead the Government dogs up here, to capture us!"

"So I believe, your majesty."

"Well, then, by all the devils, I'll thwart his little game. I'll send the Ferret on his trail. If he could so successfully remove the loads from the rangers' rifles, right under their noses, without being detected, I'll wager he can put a bullet through this accursed traitor's heart. Where is he, Miguel—where is the Little Ferret?"

"In the ranch, here, your majesty, drinking copiously."

"Then, send him up here, immediately. But ho! there, Miguel; tarry a moment. Why are not the works in operation? What are the gang idling for?"

"Your majesty, there is no need to work now, until we have more tanks. The casks and barrels are full."

"Indeed! This is good news. The treasury of the order will be growing fat, at this rate. When can you be ready to dispose of a cargo, Miguel?"

"At any hour, your majesty. Everything is in readiness for a start."

"Well, then, say day after to-morrow, for instance. Start a courier immediately for stations D and E, so that the grain will be waiting for your arrival. Hollo had best go, this time. I hope, before long, to make such arrangements with the farmers around Zossel, as will facilitate the earlier transportation of their grain. But now, away, and send Ferret!"

Miguel turned toward the ranch, and when he had disappeared Cloven-Hoof sat upon a rock near the edge of the plateau, and gave himself up to reflection. Not long however was he left alone, for soon there won a footstep, and Aspero came forth to the Demon's side.

"Ha! my worthy prime minister," said the creature, giving an approving snort, "we bid fair to overhaul this traitorous King of the Hills, yet. I am about to send the Ferret after him!"

"What! the little Dutchman?"

"Yes, I believe him the shrewdest man in the valley to undertake the job. His success in unloading the rangers' rifles, has fixed him strong in my confidence. He's an odd one, though!"

"True; and I should not care to let him go too far away. He might desert."

"I have no fear. But, here he comes."

A man had clambered up the ledges to the plateau, and stood close by, as if waiting for orders.

He was a stout, burly little German of some forty years, with a little bullet-shaped head, a round glossy face, and a form both corpulent and dwarfish. His eyes were black and brilliant, and they, together with the general expression of his florid countenance, gave him a sharp, cunning but intelligent look.

In the Vulture stronghold he was known as Little Ferret, but his real name was Hans Vonderberg.

"Ha!" said the Demon Buffalo, with his customary initiatory snort. "Is the Ferret ready to leave the Valley of Vultures, in pursuit of the King of the Hills?"

"Vat vor you wants me to do?" queried the Teuton, eying the horrible object before him narrowly.

"I wants do kno' dot, before I answers your query!"

"I want you to go immediately to the rangers' camp, where you were day before yesterday, and see if the missing man, Warren, is there, and if he is, you must shoot him down, without hesitation!"

"Dat is goot," nodded Little Ferret, approvingly.

"I shudes him so quicker as vat nevar was. Shall I sdarts right away off, all the vile?"

"Yes, go at once, and hurry back as soon as you dispatch your man!"

The man bowed, and then turned and clambered down into the valley. Ten moments later he appeared on the river shore, and shoved one of the canoes off into the stream.

Then he sprang in, and the two watchers on the cliff-plateau saw him drift rapidly to the north and soon disappear, like the seething waters, through the black aperture in the bottom of the wall of rock.

CHAPTER XV.

OFF FOR THE APACHE VILLAGE.

AS soon as he was out of sight, Cloven-Hoof turned to Aspero, and said:

"You may go, minister, and see that those ruffians do not get too drunk, down there. We may need every man, soon, for if these rangers should learn our hiding-place, it would be easy work to surround us, with such directions as young Warren can give them. How many hands have we now, Aspero, all told?"

"Seventy-six, your majesty, not counting the Indians and half-breeds, who are continually soaked with whisky, and unfit for duty. There are twenty of them, I believe. But, captain, I fail to see what good these vagrants are to the Order. Also, there are thirty of the whites who are drunk the greater share of the time. We derive no benefit from them."

"I know, Aspero, it seems so at present. But, hark ye! it would take another small life-time to 'break in' a set of men, who would fear and obey

me, as these wretches do. Though of but little use now, we know not how soon we shall be in need of their services, to defend our retreat. Indeed, I fear the day is not distant, when we shall have to disband, and flee to better spheres, sublime. Therefore, it behooves us to work while there is a chance.

"Miguel informs me that a cargo is now ready for the 'shove.' I am inclined to think we had not better operate any more, then, until we see how matters shape. Le Count, my agent at Station J, along the Rio Grande, says, in his last dispatch, that his clerk has discovered a capital place for a retreat, along the Union Pacific Railroad. It is within reach of several thriving villages, where we could both make an occasional swoop, and dispose of our juice."

"Indeed! Well, captain, it is for you to say—not me. But it seems like folly to give up this place, when we have just got nicely settled here!"

"Yes, that is true. But, let us talk no longer. See to the men down there, and then prepare yourself for a long ride. I desire that you shall accompany Sky-Rocket to his village, and bring back the horses to Station E. The agent there will take charge of them, and dispose of them at the best advantage to the overland trains."

"And who shall I take with me, captain, to help?"

"I care not; any of the band, except Miguel. He must remain to keep things straight at the ranch."

Aspero bowed, and then left the plateau for the valley, below.

As soon as he was gone, Cloven-Hoof re-entered the cavern, and ascended to the council chamber. The moment his terrible head appeared above the top of the pulpit, Sky-Rocket, the Apache, came forward.

"The Demon-Buffalo is great, and Sky-Rocket would like to tarry longer within his stone tents," said the chief, graciously. "But the wiser finger of his nature points toward his far-distant village, and bids him depart. He must go. Does the great Cloven-Hoof object?"

"Not at all," replied Cloven-Hoof. "Let Sky-Rocket wait here, and the Demon-Buffalo will send two servants to guide him from the Vulture Valley, and accompany him on his journey."

Then the strange being was gone, in a flash, as before, and a half-hour rolled by. At the expiration of this time, the prime-minister, Aspero, appeared in the chamber, coming from the fissure. He was followed by a burly ruffian, whose features at once declared him to be a Swede.

"Are you ready?" demanded Aspero.

Sky-Rocket released Adams's feet, and then signified his readiness to depart.

Aspero re-entered the fissure, followed closely by the Swede. Sky-Rocket bade the girls to follow him, and Captain Chris to follow them, while he brought up the rear. Thus the party proceeded. The fissure had been hewn out by the hand of man, evidently, and led to the cavern below. In the course of ten minutes the whole party were in the basin, below the plateau.

Here Aspero and the Swede launched the flatboat, and the four prisoners, Sky-Rocket and themselves were loaded in. An extra man was also taken along, to tow the boat back into the valley, as soon as its cargo was disembarked in the outer world.

At a given word the moorings were cut, and the bark with its human freight shot off with the rapid current, toward the north.

Soon the aperture in the base of the mountain was reached, and the boat passed into a little tunnel, where the light of day never penetrated. All was so intensely black, and the boat leaped on with such velocity, that the prisoners held their breath in awe and anxiety.

The channel was barely wide enough to admit the passage of so large a craft, and the two outlaws had to watch narrowly to keep it from grating on the rough rocky sides.

Suddenly a flood of light burst upon the scene; the momentum of the race lessened, while the boat shot along upon the level of a less rapid run of water. They were still underground, but now and then a bar of light streamed down from an opening in the rocky ceiling overhead, showing that they were out of the mountains.

For perhaps a mile further, the subterranean voyage continued, and then the boat suddenly shot out into a large basin filled with water—a picturesque little lake, in a low valley, fringed with trees.

Toward the northern shore Aspero and the Swede propelled the boat, and were soon alongside a small plateau of rock, or natural wharf.

The whole party save the man who was to work the boat back into the Vulture Valley, now disembarked, and Sky-Rocket went off in the motte of cottonwood, for his horses, which he had left there a day before.

He soon returned with six wiry mustangs. The ladies were mounted. Captain Chris was now allowed the free use of his arms, but was compelled to ride along with the girls, while Sky-Rocket and Aspero took the lead, and the Swede brought up the rear.

When all were mounted, and everything was in readiness, the Apache gave the word, and the cavalcade dashed off toward the north.

They soon left the timber and galloped out across a level stretch of prairie, and Captain Chris saw that they were on the western side of the water-course, about ten miles from the rangers' camp.

On looking back toward the mountain, he perceived that not a glimpse was to be obtained of the location of the robbers' retreat. Naught but a majestic wall of mountain towered up there in the distance, its peaks stretching far up toward the blue vault of heaven.

As it was well into the afternoon when they left

the lake, but a comparatively short distance was traversed ere night fell with its hovering shadows, over hill and dale.

During the rapid ride, Captain Chris managed to keep up a conversation with the young ladies; but when the camp was pitched for night he was separated from their society.

Out of his saddle-bags, Sky-Rocket brought forth a plentiful supply of dried venison, and a hearty meal was made therefrom, by all.

As Aspero insisted on standing guard the fore part of the night, and the Swede the latter part, the chief was compelled to yield, though it was with bad grace.

The maidens were given what blankets there were, and as the night was warm no other covering was needed, the soft grass serving the purpose of a bed. At the command of Sky-Rocket they lay with their faces turned down to the ground.

His explanation was, that as they were unaccustomed to sleeping in open air, they were liable to catch a severe cold should they lie on either their sides or back.

Right here let me say; that this bit of information applies to all who visit our great West, and sleep exposed to the night air. In summer nights the hunter may lie in almost any position without catching cold, if he is accustomed to roughing it, but in the damper months of spring and late autumn, the posture of the general plainsman is invariably flat upon the stomach, with the face turned directly downward.

Experience will soon teach one the choice of position. And, too, when you lie with your face downward, and your forehead pillowed upon your arm, your sleep is less sound, more refreshing and beneficial, while your hearing is doubly acute.

Captain Chris was bound, hand and foot, and hauled near where the chief was to lay. Then, after Aspero was posted on duty, Sky-Rocket and the Swede flung themselves upon the green turf, and silence reigned in the camp.

The night passed without incident, and early in the following morning the cavalcade resumed the journey northward.

All day long they galloped on, and at nightfall again went into camp.

Aspero stood guard until midnight, when he was relieved by Sky-Rocket.

Soon after, the loud breathing of the outlaw proclaimed that he was sound asleep. Going to his saddle, the Apache chief took out two long lariats from the bags. These he dexterously fastened around the feet of both Aspero and the Swede, without attracting their attention. Then leading forth the most spirited horse of the six, he secured the other ends of the lariats to the animal's high hind leg near the haunch, and thrusting a cactus-stalk under his tail, calmly awaited the result.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PRISONER.

At the rangers' camp, the rangers and the Navajoe Indians were anxiously waiting for the return of both Captain Chris and Jerrold the artist.

Although the latter was nothing to them, they took an interest in his welfare, and were anxious to know whether or not he had won the wild race.

As to Captain Chris, there was not a heart that beat beneath the buck-skin hunting-shirts of the sturdy whites, that did not beat truly for the gallant ranger chief. They all loved him as a brother and leader, and would have willingly fought till the last to shield him from death.

For years the band had served under his command, and every member had found him all they could wish for, both as a captain and companion.

The Leopard, in fact, regarded him as a brother, and now, as another night began to cast its somber shadows athwart the earth, he became fidgety and uneasy.

"I tell ye what," he said, solemnly, "I judge suthin's ther row. Capten Chris 'd never say erway from his brood o' chickens this long, w'out cause. Either he's run afoul sum durned snag, or else he ain't, an' I dunno w'ich. Wat's yer view on ther subject, Jack-as?"

Old Jack ruminated a few moments before he replied, in the meantime keeping a "weather-eye out" upon his watchful spouse, Peggy, who, to use his own words, "stuck chusser ter him than ther h'ar ter er mountain devil's tail."

"Dunno," he said, knocking the ashes from his pipe, meditatively. "I ken't quite swaller it all, myself. Ther varmint as 'd shute, or otherwise maw-treat ther boyce, couldn't hev no more stumake then er 'Pash; which they hain't got none ertall."

"Celestial Singers! no! Ther 'Pash as' ther orneriest uv all oncery yowlers, from ther West Pole ter ther eekuator. Ef I war er kannybull, an' didn't hev no better wits, I'd like ter enswage my services ter ther government in er Injun-eatin' kany-pacty. I'd hev nuthin' better nor a fine fat 'Pash fur dreckfuss, w' smoked Komanch fur side dish, ye kno'; a gude fat 'Pash fur supper, an' a leetle squaw jes' afore bedtime. Fur dinner, I'd prefer a whop-pin' fat Washington Senator. Ther's nuthin' on thes terrestrial foolstool like er gude slick Senator. Ther slickerishness goes fur an offset 'gin ther rich, greasy qualifications of ther 'Pash. An' too, ther's ermuter p'int. Wen ye take senators fur dinner, et don't cost ye nuthin' fur wine an' Con-scious cigars. They're chock full on 'em. Senators don't ead fer deserts, either."

"Talk 'bout coyote fude!" said Old Jack; "ye jes orter sock yer fangs onter my Peg, hyar. Ther hain't er tuffer peece o' humen clay thes side Nosh's ark, an' I'll wager er plug o' dog-tail ther tooth nevyar war invented w'at kin peece her skin. Ther kannybull w'at gets Peggy fer er meal 'd better

eat her er day er tew afore he goes ter sleep, so 's he ken hev ample time ter suggest her. I'd hev guv her ter ther coyotes an' buzzards long ergo ef et hedn't be'n 's I know'd et would extermine ther hull caboodle er chawin' her. Why, boyce, even w'en I uste ter go an' spark her, afore we got con-soliderated, w'en I'd got ter try an' kiss her, her hide war so tuft an' strong ther I culdn't make ther leest impresshun!"

"Thet's nuthin'," replied Life, disdaintfully. "I once sparked er Crow squaw, w'at war so strong, thet w'en I slapt my lips 'gin her cheek they stuck thar tighter then a ten-scudde vise, an' ther ole cheek hed to hitch on twenty mustangs ter each on us tew pull us apart!"

"I guv up," sighed Old Jack, hopelessly. "I thort I war purty goode on ther erlongate; but skulp me, ef ye ain't ther infernal liar I ever did run across!"

"Thet's nothin'!" laughed Life; "therm's merely 'facks.' Wait till ye heer me tell er good squar' yarn. Then ye ken talk!"

"Jes' don't tell et now," observed Circus Pete; "but look yander. Thar kums ther fortygraffer; he's got ther 'Greaser' cross his saddle-bows, too, by Jer-rushy! Yes, an' thar's ermuter feller 'long w'it him. Look!"

Two men were approaching the camp, mounted on horses. One was readily recognized as Jonathan Jerrold, the artist. Before him, across the neck of his scrawny horse, he bore the body of a man—the Mexican *alcade*.

The second horseman was mounted upon a superb animal, but was unknown to the rangers.

The twain galloped leisurely along into camp, and Jerrold was greeted with round after round of applause.

"Bully boy!" went up from the red-skins as well as the rangers.

"I kno'd thet beast o' yourn war no slouch!" saluted the Leopard, grinning.

"She is a good courser, is *La Belle*," said the artist, smiling. "Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Colonel Alonzo Nesmit, of Zosset!"

"What! ther feller as the capten hed the letter to?" asked Life, excitedly.

"The same. He assisted me, in one sense of the word, in capturing this senseless villain here!"

"But the capten; whar's he?" demanded the rangers, eagerly.

"Captain Adams left my hacienda night before last," replied Nesmit, "with the intention of coming back to camp. He explained his haste by saying that he felt he should soon be needed here. This morning I concluded to ride over this way and see how you were getting along. On the trail, not far from Zosset, I discovered his dead horse. There were numerous footprints close at hand, which led me to believe that your leader has been surprised and captured."

"An' by whom?" queried Life.

"The outlaws, doubtless. The tracks bore the impress of boots!"

A cry of anger escaped the ranger's lips.

"Cuss the luck; et's nuthin' more'n I expected!" growled Life, "an' now the devil 'll be to pay."

While he was consulting with the men, who had gathered around him, Colonel Nesmit and Jerrold dismounted. The senseless *alcade* was securely bound, and left in the care of the former, while Jonathan once more mounted *La Belle* and struck off to the south, for the purpose of bringing his schooner into camp. He returned in the course of half an hour, and somewhat startled the camp with the declarations that he had seen a form skulking in the shadows of the dead pines, and also, that his schooner had been plundered of its contents, even to the howitzer and photograph apparatus.

Grizzly Len and Alaska at once volunteered to scour the neighborhood for the enemy, and they soon hurried off.

Darkness had now settled thickly over the earth, and as there were no prospects of having a moon until nine o'clock, Colonel Nesmit suggested that a fire be kindled.

"Nix," said the Leopard, authoritatively. "nary er smidger. Ef ther senty o' ther smokin' 'Pash about they 'll find us quick enough, nevyer ye fear, w'out our lightin' ther way fur 'em. Hyar, thar, Jack-as; s'posin ye ante-lope erkrass ter ther other side o' ther gully hyar, an' see how things like thar. Thar might be er passel o' ther imps o'er thar now fer what I kno'."

Old Jack, too, soon disappeared in the pall of gloom, and the rangers in camp waited patiently.

Stinging Wasp roused all his warriors and bade them make ready for a fight, and savage as they were, they needed no urging.

An hour passed, and the camp was wrapped in silence. All were waiting and listening.

Not a sound was to be heard save the low whistle of the rising wind, through the Phantom Forest.

Life glanced toward the east ever and anon, uneasily. It was time the moon should arise; but through the thick shroud of black night the first heralding flush of its appearance was visible.

"What time is it, do ye judge?" he inquired of Jerrold, who had crept to his side. "Past moon-risin' time eh?"

By pressing the face of his watch close to his eyes, the artist declared it to be exactly nine o'clock.

Half an hour followed, but no moon shed her rays upon the scene.

"Thet settles it," whispered Life. "Et ar' clouded up, an' a storm 'll be on us, soon—a rippin' tornado!"

"I believe it. And during its fury, we may expect an attack," replied Jerrold, "if there are Indians about!"

"Earect!" acknowledged the ranger; "but listen! 'Sh—!"

Both became silent as death. There was a rustling in the grass, directly ahead of them. What caused it? Some one was creeping down upon them.

CHAPTER XVII.

LITTLE FERRET—THE TORNADO—APACHE.

"St—!" again cautioned the Leopard, as he laid his rifle to one side, and clutched the haft of his knife.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of rustling grass.

Then for a few moments all was quiet.

"Ye swerve ter ther rite," whispered Life, placing his knife between his teeth, "an' I'll ante-lope off to ther left. Don't ye make even er squeek o' noise, an' we'll surround the varmint!"

Jerrold obeyed, and crept away with the stealth of a cat. For perhaps ten minutes he wiggled slowly on; then believing he had gone far enough, he stopped and listened, intently.

At this instant there rose high and loud on the night, the distinct sounds of voices, in excited conversation.

"Ouch! ouch! Oh! Got in heime! vat vor you so mooch bull mine hair. I vas no Injning; so don't you vas pe so vast. Ouch! ouch! leds me go, I dole you, or I vill yell like dunder!"

"Whoop!" roared the stentorian voice of the Leopard; "so I've cotched ye, hev I; ye little kicker! I'll larn ye ter kim prowlin' around our camp, I will! Skim my teeth, tho', ye skunk, but ye've an odd silver frum ther block. Kim erlong hyar, and led's inspeck ye. Boyees, ahe'd thar, strike er lite; I've got er Dutch red-skin!"

Then followed a kicking and thrashing noise, intermingled with furious curses, as the Leopard dragged his victim back toward the camp.

The artist also turned his steps thitherward, eagerly.

A bit of *vesquas* or dry punk-wood was ignited, shaded by the rangers' caps, and held close to the prisoner's face.

The light thus afforded, enabled all to see that he was a white man—a burly, muscular little fellow, whose face at once proclaimed him a German.

"Ouch!" he gasped, as one of the rangers accidentally allowed the flaming end of the torch to touch his nose; "tot vas ash bigger shame ash I don't see before vor some time. You gadptures a poor veller; poods him mit der rips, an' pull him py der hair, ant den puras der eent off of his nose. Vat vor you do dat? I vas no hog! I knose ven I vas got ernuff!"

"W'at in ther name o' ther thirty-seven constelashuns o' stars, ar' ye snoopin' around our kamp fer, then?" demanded Life, drawing the back of his knife-blade repeatedly across the Dutchman's forehead. "D'ye perseeve that I've an orful antipittiphy ergin that h'ar o' yours? Better speek out then. Who you war?"

"Leedle Verret," was the sullen reply.

"Whar d'ye kim from?"

"Robber gamps."

"Hey! ye don't tell us! Wall, w'at war ye goin' ter do, jes' now?"

"See off Villip Varren vash in der gamp!"

"An' who's he?"

"He vas von mon ash deserted!"

"Ha! boyees, we've struck er big mine hyar; Celestial Vocalists, yas. I say, ye Dutch skunk, hes yer robber band got any prisoners?"

Little Ferret shook his head.

"Don't vas kno!" he replied.

"Don't, eh? Wal, all right. Now, w'ich way d'ye wantar take et?"

"Dake vat?" asked the Teuton, in surprise.

"Death!" was the stern reply.

"Ouch! ouch! you no vas goin' der kill me? Dunder! you vas vorser as der Injnings. Oh! don't gill me, mishdter! I vas nout ready to die. Ledt me fliff, undt I vill figt mit you, I vill giss you; I vill do anydinks, radder dan I vash to die."

"Will you show us where we can find these out-laws?" demanded Colonel Nesmit.

"Yawl yaw! I shows you vare tay peesh, if you vas no gill me. I dakes you do der Fuldture Falley, an' helbs you vite midt der robbers. I vash no like 'em. I gill 'em so quicker ash dunder!"

"All k'rect; we'll see 'bout that, byme-by. In ther meentime," said Life, "we shal hev ter die ye up!"

"Yaw. I don't vas gare so long ash you vas not gill me," was the reply.

Accordingly, the prisoner was securely bound, and left lying near the spot where Jerrold had deposited his captive, who, as yet, had not awakened.

About this time Old Jack made his appearance from beyond the channel.

"How's ther lay?" asked Life.

"Bad," was the answer—"buzzin' bad! 'Pash t'other side, thicker'n frogs in er swamp. Creepin' up, easy-loike. 'Pash up nor', in ther water-course; 'Pash up nor', on thes er' side on it!"

"Thunderashun! Is it posseybul we're surround-et?"

"Peers ter me that way, purty much. Heerd from Grizzly Len and Alaska yit?"

"No. Not er squeek."

"Reckon they'll be in soon, then, fer ther's er hell of a tornader brewin'!"

"What is best to do?" asked Jerrold.

"I'll tell ye my tiee," replied Jack, as he listened for a moment to the rapidly-increasing volume of wind, which came whistling down from the north-west, and gave an uneasy glance around him. "I opine we'd better scoot, jes' as fast as we can."

"Scoot?" echoed the others.

"Perzactly! Ther further we can git outen ther track o' thes er' tornader, ther safer we'll be, fur et

ar' goin' ter be a ripper, an' ther trees an' stuns will fly hilter-skitter. Ha! hyar kims ther b'yees, now. Let's see w'at they say."

As he spoke, Grizzly Len and Alaska came hurrying into camp. They were quite out of breath, and not a little excited.

"Pash!" gasped Alaska.

"All around us, thicker'n hornets," coincided Grizzly, taking out his knife-blade, which was dripping with blood. "We'd better kerflummix outen thes, ef we've got enny desire ter retain our capillary persessions."

"But, how can we get out?" asked Colonel Nesmit, "if we are surrounded?"

"Hev ter make er rush fer et!" was the grim reply. "We've got ter chews atween thet an' fightin' six hundred red niggers. I say git!"

"So do I!" joined in the body of the rangers. "Git's ther word!"

"Which way shell et be?" asked Len.

"East, on course!" decided Life.

"Ranger heap wrong!" now put in Stinging Wasp, who had been a silent listener. "Best go west—north. Ugh!"

"Like thunder we will!" ejaculated the Leopard, sharply. "D'ye s'pose we're goin' ter face er rip-roarin' tornader? Not muchly, ef I kno' mysel!"

"Wagh! Injin kno' heap more dan pale-face 'bout big wind. Go south or east an' 'Pache light grass, an' fire chase you like debbil—run fast like white lightning—no git out ob its path. Go north; ride slow through tornado; be all right; wind blow dirt ober trail, an' 'Pache no follow; go west, de same!"

"By ther Celestial Singers, Injin, ye're er masheen-mann'yackterd brick, o' dubble-compresst axum!" cried Life, seeing the wisdom in the chief's words. "We'll foller yer directions. To hoss, all hands, an' we'll cross ther t'other side o' ther gully!"

As *La Belle* was yet harnessed to the "schooner," it was proposed that the two prisoners and Jack and Peggy should accompany the artist therein, while the remainder of the party, being well mounted, should lead the way. Everything was soon in readiness, and the strange caravan began to toil cautiously down into the channel and up to the banks on the opposite side.

Fully an hour was consumed in this operation, when a consultation was once more held.

By this time the booming roar announced that the tornado was close at hand.

"Et's goin' ter be er snizzer, tho'!" observed Alaska, meditatively.

"Yes!" replied Stinging Wasp; "there will be heap much blow. Navajoe no afraid of tornado!"

"Now, I'll tell ye w'at I speculate," said the Leopard. "I'm a nateral-born wiggler, an' I propose thet I stretch my propensities out erkross thes prairer, hyar, an' see how cluss ther reds are, before I lead ye inter a bumble-bee's nest!"

"Wagh! yes," assented the chief; "that is good. Den Leopard come back, an' Stinging Wasp ride fast, down to the Apache, an' tell um dey wanted up north—dat pale-face escapin' dat way. Navajoe lead um good way off; den slip away an' skedaddle back to pale-faces. He! he! Fool um, big!"

"But, are you not afraid of being discovered?" asked Colonel Nesmit, anxiously. "Will not they find that you are not an Apache?"

"Wagh! no! Navajoe dress much like 'Pache. Stinging Wasp kno' 'Pache tongue. He fool um much heap—like grizzly b'ar fool raccoon!"

"And how is that?"

"Let raccoon nibble at end ob his tail 'til it get sore; den b'ar trot away!" was the grim reply.

It is unnecessary to state that the rangers did not see the point—the point of the tail.

A general laugh followed, however, though it was somewhat subdued.

"Now," said Life, "let's ter bizness. Hyar, Circus; jes' hold my hoss, will ye?"

Pete took the rein of his mate's horse, and slipping flat upon the ground, the agile ranger crept away through the pall of blackness.

With anxious hearts the band awaited his return.

The fierceness and roar of the tornado now became greater every instant. The trees behind them creaked and groaned, the gale howled and shrieked furiously among the crashing, weaving and snapping branches, while a perfect avalanche of dirt, uprooted grass, sticks and gravel came hurtling down from the north-west.

In among all this waited our friends—eagerly, expectantly.

In fifteen minutes the Leopard came skurrying up.

"Pash off thar—ha! f m-m-ile!" he gasped, wiping the dirt from his eyes.

Like a meteor, Stinging Wasp shot away to perform his part.

An hour passed: the tornado raged with fierce fury; still the chief came not.

Hark! a wild pandemonium of yells from afar—Apache yells! Has Stinging Wasp been discovered?

CHAPTER XVIII.

THROUGH THE SNARE—FERRET'S STORY.

No! not discovered; for at this juncture a horseman dashed wildly up; he was the daring Navajoe chief.

"Ugh! come!" he cried, exultantly; "me fool um heap big. Dey mile off dar. We get through snare fore dey come back. Wagh! ride much fast!"

He then wheeled his foaming horse toward the west, and led the way, followed closely by Life, his rangers and the tribe—Jerrold bringing up the rear with his loaded schooner.

Like the tornado that rushed fiercely down upon them, the caravan dashed on, the yells of the betrayed savages sounding nearer and nearer.

Stinging Wasp held his way, silent and grim, and it was not till full three miles had been compassed that he drew rein.

"Wagh!" listening to the awful roaring and booming of the gale; "much hard 'nado. Much blow! Wind gettin' bigger! Ugh!"

"Zactly!" responded the Leopard. "Et ar' ther dum-kusseded gale I ever see'd—er regylar nor'east volcaner o' blowitiveness!"

"Not stop soon," declared the chief, anxiously. "Blow all night. 'Pache close behind. Ugh! wait! Navajoe fix 'em!"

What was the ranger's surprise to see the red-skin then quickly dismount.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Wagh!" responded Stinging Wasp, with a chuckle. "Injin and Devil Snake after 'Pache. Dey no like him. Dey run, but he run faster. He cotch um. He tickle um legs, and make um dance de death-dance. Ugh!"

Quickly drawing one of his pistols, the chief hurried to the rear of the caravan, and discharged the weapon down into the grass. In a second a bright spiral column of flame flared up, which on being fanned by the furious breath of the tornado, instantly developed itself into a sea of crackling, hissing, roaring fire, and was soon borne on south-eastward, a gigantic sheet of awful flame.

"Whoop!" yelled Stinging Wasp, full of glee. "Rangers wait here. Navajoe be back soon. Ugh!"

And with another cry of triumph, the savage dashed off in a direct northerly line.

Every few moments they could hear the report of his revolver; then would come leaping south-eastward a giant ocean of rolling flame. In an hour fully two miles in width of furious fire was sweeping down across the prairies, toward the old water-course.

Shrieks from the tortured Apaches rose high above the boom of the tornado of fire.

The savages were truly caught in a trap. There was no use of trying to escape. The flames had burst like an infernal sea upon them; they could not escape the merciless tongues of fire in flight; they could only fight fire with fire, until a horrible death came to their relief.

On rushed the hurricane of destruction, like the red garments of a demon.

From their position the rangers watched the grand yet awful sight with feelings of awe and of pity for the doomed wretches within that path of death.

Already the fire had reached the channel, and swept across to the further side, in mad pursuit of the red-skins beyond.

The tall, bare, dry trees in Phantom Forest loomed up like specters of wrath, as they, too, became wrapt in a fiery winding-sheet.

Far away, growing more distant and indistinct, surged the pursuing scourge, while the shrieks and howls of the Apaches became scarcely audible.

In the track left behind by the fire was a black, charred waste of smoking debris and ashes.

When he had set the fire as far as he cared to, Stinging Wasp returned to where he had left the caravan.

"Wagh!" he said, with a chuckle of triumph; "Pache dogs no like Devil Snake. Dey get bit! he! he! he!"

"Ye guv 'em er blizzard they won't be likely ter disreckoleck fer er w'ile," replied the Leopard.

"But, w'at now? W'at d'ye advise war best ter do at present?"

"Go on furdur," said the chief. "Git out of smell. Den camp. 'Morrer, go wid Dutchman, an' scalp robbers!"

"Good. It shal be as ye say. But, hold up er bit. Le' s see ef all hands are hyar, alive an' kickin'!"

A roll-call was the next thing in order, and it was discovered that all the rangers, as well as the Navajoes, were present.

Then Stinging Wasp led the way on in a westerly course, while the cavalcade brought up the rear.

"W'ouldn't keer ter 've bin in them thar 'Pash's galters!" remarked Life, as he galloped alongside of the chief. "Reckon 's they thort fryin' time hed er-ived. Ther varmint got in ther same fix we'd 've bin in ef we'd gone east. Ole hoss, we all owe our lives ter ye; d'ye perseeve et?"

"Ugh!" grunted the Navajoe, grimly. "Stinging Wasp no fool. He see long way ahead!"

"Yas, ye must hev eyes like tellerscope. Thunderashun!"

This exclamation was caused by the violent rearing of both the Leopard's and the chief's horses.

Hasty examination disclosed that the party had arrived on the banks of a small lake, into which our two friends had almost urged their animals.

"Wagh!" said Stinging Wasp, dismounting. "Camp here. Plenty grass and water. Timber yonder to right. No Injins. Good place to camp. Ugh!"

So it was decided to stop there for the night—what remained of it.

All hands dismounted eagerly.

The animals were watered and tethered out to graze, while a rousing camp-fire was kindled on the lake shore.

The warriors set to work with their hatchets, and out of the branches and poles in the adjacent wood, constructed several rude lodges for the occupancy of the squaws of the tribe. While this was going on the Leopard and several of the rangers started off in different directions in search of game, and Stinging Wasp made a circuit of the beautiful little sheet of water.

He was highly pleased with the surroundings, and at once decided to build his village in this secluded spot.

Life and the rangers each returned in the course of half an hour, bearing portions of recently killed

deer, which had been driven into a quagmire by the furious tornado, and held close prisoners.

Soon after the camp was wrapt in slumber, for the night was nearly spent, and it was desirable to obtain all the rest possible.

In the morning Stinging Wasp declared it his intention to build his village on the site of the present camp, and he set his braves to work at manufacturing canoes for the lake and lodges for the prospective town.

After the morning meal Little Ferret was hauled out from the schooner into the presence of the rangers.

"Now," said the Leopard, "we're red-dy fer yer assistance. Ye ken show us whar ther robbers' camp ar'!"

The Dutchman took in the surroundings at a glance. "Dundter!" ejaculated he, as he saw the lake lying before him, "you vas gum der to right shot. Dis lage vas vere ve gum vrom der robbers' camp!"

"Frum ther robbers' camp? 'Splain yerself. 'Wat d'ye mean?"

"You berseve dot exgavashun, ofer dar' eh?" queried Ferret, pointing to the black hole in the distant bank. "Vell dot vas der blaze vere vrom all dis vasser vas gum. Dere ish von underground shannel vat runs vay pack ub hill indo der segrit falley. Ven der robbers vas vants der gum outsidar, dey gots demselves inder er poat vat ish vlat, and ridtes vite away town indo dish lage!"

"Indeed!" said Colonel Nesmit. "Then is there no other way to penetrate the outlaws' quarters?"

"Yaw, dere vash von odder vay, but you vas no ged in dere. It pe inter der ghampers op der Gloven-Hoof!"

"Then, ye jedge ye kin ram us up throught thet ar' passage, hey?" asked Lije, meditatively.

"Nix!" was the reply. "Shust you lisdens, unt I dells you somedings. Vash you dink ash vat all dem roppers unt outlaws do, peesh roppin'! Dundter! den you vash all misdagens. Vash you dink dot dem Gloven-Hoof pe a tuyfel? Dundter! den you peesh misdagens again. Vash you dinks you goride oop mit ter falley, andt lick all off dem robbers so easy ash vat you drink viskey? Dundter! den you vas more misdagen unt poth swi dimes pefore. Yaw! I speaks dhu."

"Off you lisdens, I dells you somedings vat you don' know; so help me! I vas peen von robbers sinze der gang vas organized. Von veller goomes do me mit St. Louis, von day, andt says he, vell, my goodt vrendt, how you vas? 'Burdy sny, sbeags I, 'how vas yourself?' 'He tole me ash how he vas gooter as goodt, undt dells me ash how vas I vant do mage somedinks?' 'I say yaw, 'ant he toles me vat if I tagcompany him, he gifts me finfen-swanzy tollar a veek, do make dundter! I agrees, unt he prings me up yonter mit de moundings, ant I vind myself in von pig falley, locked in mit der beeks, vere dere peesh lofs off men, in gaverns magin viskey!"

"What!" exclaimed Colonel Nesmit, excitedly, "whisky?"

"Yaw. But lisdens vat I say. In von pig champer apove der vone vere dey mages der viskey, vash vat dey gall a gourt-room. Here vash der gwarders off der Deemons Puffer, or der Gloven-Hoofs, ash dey gall him. He has got von lod off vellers, mit clothes ofer mit der heads, unt he mages der men vat manyfactures der viskey p'leve ash he ish von Tuyfel, andt dot dem vellers mid der clothes ofer mit der heads pe shirridts vrom Burgadory. But dot vas noddinks more ash hoompug. I knows better ash dot. I von day dook von peek indo der gourt-room, unt I see'd dem vellers unt der Puffer dakes der dings mit der heads off, undt I see'd dot dey vash noddinks more ash men, like anypoddies."

"Vell, efery vonce in von long vile der vellers vat mages der viskey dey go oop mit der gourt-room, unt Aspero—dot's der Brime Minishder—he buys 'em off midt goldt fur der lator. On such oggassions ash dese, unt all odther oggassions off imbortance, Aspero lozeks me up mit von cells under der blace vere der spirits sit, in der shamber pelow. Den, ven der Puffer bulls von leedle sdring, vat communigates mit von leedle pell, in mine cell, I mages dundter on von pig paco-drum, shust so hard ash I gan, unt hisses lige von goose. Dem shakasses off distillers, dey dink it is dundter unt blitzen glose afther dem, undt skedattles o'd mit der ranch, avraid ash ter tuyfel off dem Puffer an' sbeerits!"

Here the Dutchman broke into a hearty laugh, in which the rangers joined him.

"How about the Phantom Cortège and the Demon Buffalo who gave us a visit the other night?" asked Jerrold.

"Dem vas Gloven-Hoofs unt his sbeerits," was the reply. "Dey vas dink dey sgare you, so much ash never vas. Put dey pe 'fraid mit your guns; so dey sendt me down mit your camp, unt I wiggle oop unt dook der bullets unt mit your guns, right unt mit dot drapper's nose."

And there the German gave Old Jack a comical glance of disdain.

"That settles who tampe ed with the weapons!" said Jerrold, calmly. "I doubt not that you have all wondered who I am—supposed that there was something behind all my outlandish appearance. You have then conjectured rightly, and I shall presently come to you in a new light. But, Dutchman, you intimate that these outlaws are running an illicit distillery, in connection with their robber raids, eh?"

"Yaw. Der robber pizness vas onty von plindt. Ven der Vuldchurs mage a raid ondo von goot settlement, unt der Gloven-Hoofs sgares der beoples so vorser ash never vas, id vas ondy vor do greate von sensation, so dot der settlers v'nt noddies noddings 'poudt vat loads off grain are peim' drawn down dis vay vrom der upper settlement's py der agents off der ban—"

"Sh—!" here interrupted the Leopard, grasping Ferret by the arm, excitedly. "Celestial Singers! look! ther robbers, by thunder!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WHISKY-RAFT—BLOOD AND VICTORY.

He pointed across the lake toward the black aperture in the opposite shore. A canoe had drifted therefrom, out upon the surface of the lake.

Not a person was seen to occupy it, and yet it was suspected that there were outlaws concealed in the hold.

"Nix," said the Dutchman, after surveying the little bark for a moment, "no robbers in dot poat. Id peesh der von dot I used, ven I gum down mit der shannels. I leabs him hitched yooist inside der endrance mit der shannel, yeshterday afternoon, unt he vash gone unt poke away. I gatches him, off you vill pe so gind ash do gut dese here sdraps, ash bind me!"

Ferret's limbs were at once freed, after which he swam out and pulled the canoe in to shore.

As he had said, it was unoccupied.

When the thread of the conversation was again resumed, Colonel Nesmit asked:

"Now, then, Dutchy, give us your views of how an attack can best be made upon these outlaws; do you advise a rush into the hidden valley at once?"

"Dundter, no!" was the reply, "unless you vants do pe schopped oop, inter sausage-meets shust so quicker ash vat a tog can park. Der robbers vas got almost so many mons ash you!"

"Indeed! Then what is to be done?"

"Listen unt I dells you. Do-morrow or nexgd day, der robbers vill start von raft vrom der falley, loaded mit swanzy parrels off viskey. It vill gum town mit dis lage, unt you must be brepared to shoof efry mon vat is on der raft, vich vill be vrom swanzy to foofsy. I vill now go pack mit der falley, so dot der robbers don' vas go undt git susbicious. I vill get all off der vellers drunk, mit drugt viskey, so dot dey can no vite. Den ven you hafe shuded der robbers ont der raft, you gum up dhu mit der shannels, unt dundter! you gills um all so quicker as von minnit!"

"A good plan," said Jerrold. "You had better hurry up to the valley at once, as you have said, to prevent suspicion. If the raft comes down, we will be in readiness to receive it. You think it will come to-morrow?"

"Yaw; I so dinks. Ef dey do come id vill pe apout noon."

"Where do they usually leave their unlawful poison, after unloading it from the raft, and what becomes of it?"

"Dey unload it onto der nadtcheral wharf, town pelow here, unt von man ish lef'd midt ter viskey, vile der rest ob dem goes pack mit der falley. Den, der man vat's left, he vaitts idt nide, ven vagons dey coomes unt dakes him do der villages up nort, vere dot viskey is sold, unt grain prought pack do der lage. In der mornings der vlat-poad coomes down unt dakes der grain pack mit der falley."

"Humph! a nice game these villains are playing. I begin to see how it is, that liquor is sold so cheaply in this part of the country," said Colonel Nesmit; "but I never for a moment dreamed that there was an illicit distillery business, behind this Cloven-Hoof sensation!"

Arrangements were now made for the departure of Little Ferret, whom all the rangers felt they could trust.

He was restored his rifle and side-weapons, which had been confiscated at the time of his capture, and in the course of an hour, he sprung into his canoe, paddled across the lake, and disappeared within the mouth of the remarkable channel.

At the camp, the rangers spent the day in lounging about, or assisting the Navajoes in the construction of their village, as they chose.

Jerrold and Colonel Nesmit kept a close watch over the still unconscious alcalde, and with the assistance of Peggy Bulard endeavored to nurse him back to life and reason.

But the stamp of death was plainly marked upon the man's features.

Whether he would regain strength and consciousness again, or not, was an all-important question to Jerrold and the colonel.

His only wound resulting from the overthrow from his horse, he had received upon the forehead, in the region of the temple, and the only wonder was, that he had not been killed, outright.

"He must not die, until we can arouse him, and make him disclose that which is all the world to us, now!" said Jerrold, as he bathed the discolored brow, while the colonel was forcing a few drops of stimulant between the set teeth.

"True!" he said, earnestly. "To lose him now, when we have got him fairly in our power, would be equally disastrous and disheartening to both of us."

During the day the Navajoes had erected some twenty substantial lodges, and as darkness fell, initiatory camp-fires were built before each, presenting a strange and picturesque scene.

Life and Circus Pete had been out for a two hours' scout, but returned with the good news that no hostile foes were in sight.

Sentinels were posted, and the night passed away without incident.

In the morning active preparations were made for the reception of the expected raft of outlaws, under the superintendence of the Leopard.

Stinging Wasp with his seventy-five warriors were concealed along the shore, on either side of the opening into the channel, and in such a position that they could pour in a destructive fire upon the enemy, the instant they appeared.

Lije and his men held themselves aloof, in the background, but all were ready for a rush up the channel, when the right moment arrived.

Jerrold, Colonel Nesmit and a couple Navajoes had decided to remain at the camp, and take no part in the coming butchery. The former were anxious to be with their prisoner; the latter were left to protect the squaws.

Slowly the forenoon dragged by, but no outlaws came. Did they know of the trap that was waiting to spring upon them? Had Little Ferret warned them? Lije was asking himself these questions, when Alaska touched him on the arm.

"Listen!" he whispered.

The ranger instantly obeyed.

The notes of a loud boisterous song came floating out from the black depths within the mouth of the channel, growing more and more distinct each moment.

The raft was coming!

Quickly the Leopard glanced toward the Navajoes. Ah! they, too, had heard the song, and were eagerly waiting. They had slung their carbines to their backs, and were fitting arrows to their bows. Their reason for doing this now became obvious.

The arrows would make no loud report, to arouse the outlaws in the valley.

Near and more distinct came the strains of profane song, emanating from the coarse ruffians, who were approaching an unsuspected and sudden end of their journey.

Nearer—nearer, and then there was a shout, and the raft leaped from its subterranean course, and glided out upon the placid waters of the sunlit lake, with its freight of life, and distilled spirit of hell!

There were two score of them—all great brawny fellows, with bloated, evil faces, wild haggard eyes; and each man was in a standing position as the raft debouched into the little sheet of water.

The Navajoes needed no more.

Instantaneously the twang of seventy-five bows resounded upon the air, and a perfect cloud of arrows swept down upon the outlaws.

Strange to say not an arrow failed to bury itself in the flesh of its victim.

Thirty of the ruffians fell dead in their tracks, pierced to the heart's core, while the remaining ten, all more or less wounded and disabled, attempted to plunge overboard and escape.

But it was a vain endeavor.

Like an army of avenging demons, the Navajoes sprung into their newly-made canoes, and gave chase. Without mercy the other ten were killed, and two score of reeking scalps hung at the victors' belts a few moments later.

Flushed at his great success, Stinging Wasp then was about to make a rush up the channel, when the Leopard checked him.

"Wait, Injin," he said, wisely, "don' ye git too rampageous, now. 'Jes' wait an hour er so, an' gi' ther Dutchman er chance ter git ther rest o' ther gang chock full o' essence, then we'll all go!"

The Navajoes acquiesced with ill grace, and the whole band waited an hour before entering the subterranean pass.

In the meantime the bodies of the dead outlaws were sent to the bottom of the lake, and the raft towed ashore in the vicinity of the Indian camp.

Some time was consumed in unloading the barrels; then Stinging Wasp led his warriors into the channel followed by Lije and the rangers.

At first a deal of trouble was experienced in braving the mass of wildly roaring waters, which tore furiously down the great tunnel.

In depth the water reached to the invaders' armpits, and it was only inch by inch that any advance could be made. The roar and splash was deafening and the darkness intense.

Finally, however, Stinging Wasp made the discovery that an immense rope was drawn along the left wall, to which they could cling and thus greatly facilitate their movements.

Advantage was taken of this and the whole party moved on with considerable speed.

For perhaps two hours the watery journey was continued, when suddenly from far ahead, came a faint gleam of bright light; they were nearing the entrance to the valley.

On pressed the Navajoes wildly, eagerly.

The opening into the valley was not twenty rods beyond, when a low "halloo" echoed through the water-course. It was instantly recognized as the salutation of Little Ferret, and he was commanded to advance.

"Dundter!" he gasped, as he came up, "I vas dink ash vat you nefer vas coomin', you peesh so longt. I got dum robbers all so trunk ash puzzards, so help me!"

"Good!" said Lije. "Now, wull et be necessary fur ter g'ard this pass?"

"Yaw! Robbers maype dry der escape mit dis shannel. Rangers sday here, unt let nopodys get py. Ingings go up mit der falley unt gill um robbers. Ferret show 'em!"

A short consultation was held, and it was decided to adopt the Teuton's plan, though Lije and his men were as eag r as the Navajoes to take part in the coming affray.

Stinging Wasp, however, promised that Cloven-Hoof and his spirit jurors should be taken prisoners, and handed over to the rangers, at the termination of the battle; which somewhat appeased their desire to be in at the death.

When all this was satisfactorily arranged, Ferret went in among the savages, and they moved away.

With anxiety, and fear of the consequences, the rangers waited, and listened intently, each moment. Ere long the Navajoe warwhoops were heard and the reports of rapidly discharged weapons were faintly borne in through the long passage to the rangers.

ears. Then came scarce audible yells, and death-shrieks; the battle had commenced!

Soon, numerous bodies came dashing down against the rangers, but as they were invariably those of dead and scapless outlaws, they were permitted to rush on, with the wildly roaring waters.

An hour passed, and no sounds of further conflict were to be heard. The rangers grew chilled and impatient in their half-submerged position, and after waiting several minutes longer, they involuntarily moved forward, toward the valley.

Near the aperture-exit, they ran suddenly against Stinging Wasp, who was coming to meet them.

"Wagh!" said the chief, gladly. "Navajoe was comin' for rangers. Good! Foller Stinging Wasp! Ugh! his braves scalp all robbers. Capture Buffalo Devil and him white-robed dogs. Wagh! come!" And he turned, and led the way into the Vulture Valley.

CHAPTER XX.

RELEASED—JOYFUL RECOGNITION—WESLYN.

We must now return to Sky-Rocket's camp. When the chief thrust the prickly cactus stalk under the animal's tail, as a natural consequence, that tormented creature gave a snort of pain and terror, and sprang away. Then it became aware of the load attached to its leg, and growing still more frightened, bounded off madly over the prairie, uttering savage screams and shrieks, of a character terrible to hear. On, and away tore the frenzied beast, dragging its freight of human lives, over rocks, into yawning arroyos, over ragged crags and through streams of muddy water—away! away! seemingly gone perfectly mad.

The howls of the helpless robbers rose loud and high above the vicious screams of the horse, and awakened the four prisoners in the camp, exciting them to the greatest pitch of surprise and anxiety.

Soon, however, the wild sounds grew more and more indistinct, and finally died out, altogether.

"What is it?" asked Captain Chris, as the cunning chief advanced to where the prisoners stood. "Those were the most frightful howls and screeches I ever listened to!"

A merry laugh burst from the Apache's lips. "Wagh!" he said, drawing his knife, and cutting the rangers' bonds; "the outlaws are kissing the prairie, like the morning dew. Danger gone. Pale-face and squaws free!"

A glad cry escaped the lips of both the maidens and Captain Chris.

"Who are you?" demanded the ranger, grasping the chief's hand, and shaking it heartily. "You told me in the cavern that you were a friend but I know not yet to whom I and these young ladies are indebted, for our release!"

"Wagh!" was the reply, in a cold tone; "Sky-Rocket is a friend. Let that suffice, till morning, when all will be explained. The pale-faces must now sleep, for we shall ride many miles on the morrow. Ugh!"

Without more ado the savage threw himself upon the ground, and left the others to do the same, which they soon did, and in a few moments the camp was once more wrapt in silence.

All fell asleep except Sky-Rocket.

He was awake and watchful, and as soon as he was satisfied that the others slumbered, he cautiously arose and stole from the camp. On the prairie, half a mile distant, was a buffalo-wallow of water, and to this he made his way.

When he left the wallow and returned to the camp, all that was left of the Apache chief was the garb; for his face was as white as that of Captain Chris, the paint and stain having been removed by free applications of water.

He proceeded to kindle a small fire of dry weeds, and cook a few slices of dried venison over the flames, and by the time morning dawned, and Adams and the girls awoke, he had the breakfast all prepared.

Inez Murrillo was the first to awaken, and as she gazed around her, and her eyes fell upon the face of the man by the fire, she gave a wild, glad cry, sprung to her feet, and rushed toward him.

He arose with a pleased smile, and extended his open arms, into which she flung herself, eagerly.

"Inez! are you glad to see me?" he said, caressing her fondly.

"Oh! Philip, yes—of course I am. Oh! I am so glad—so glad!"

"Did you know me, dear, in my Indian guise?"

"Indeed no! You looked so different in the Apache dress and hideous paint, from what you did when you visited us, in the grotto. But I began to suspect, a little, though, yesterday!"

"Humph! I flatter myself I fooled Cloven-Hoof and his gang pretty nicely!" laughed the King of the Hills, "though I must admit I trembled when in the council-chamber, lest I should be detected. It was a wonder that I got away as easily as I did."

By this time Captain Chris and Nola and Guess had awakened, and were approaching—the two beautiful maidens leaning on the ranger chief's arm.

As the eyes of the captain rested upon the handsome face of Phil Warren, he uttered a cry of surprise, and drew back, sternly.

"You here, man!" he exclaimed, his countenance growing white and red by turns. "What means this intrusion?"

Warren came forward, fearlessly, and extending his hand, said:

"Sir, you have but to touch my hand, and I will explain—all, to your satisfaction, I doubt not!"

Adams drew back, and refused the proffered treaty, disdainfully.

"Back! villain!" he cried, bitterly. "I would as soon touch a serpent. You are a traitor—worse, a murderer!"

"Nay!" replied the other, calmly, "not a murderer! Listen to me, Kit Adams, and you shall hear all—all, as true as the God in heaven bears me witness."

"Thirteen years ago you organized a ranger band up in Montana, out of the most reckless and daring spirits on the wild frontier. You led them into the midst of Indian warfare, and won for them and yourself a name that is never to be forgotten by the old settlers of that region. Among your band was a dashing young adventurer named Phil Warren, whom you loved as a brother, and who loved you in return, until the crisis came, when a coldness sprung up between you and me. That crisis was this: Boys, in fact, as we were, we both fell in love with an old trapper's daughter—sweet Eva Leigh. Yours was an infatuation of youth—mine was a passionate truth of adoration."

Jacob Leigh, although a rough old trapper, had spent years in the gold mines, and had buried beneath his cabin an immense quantity of the precious metal; a fact which reached the ears of another member of your band, who had but recently joined it. This gold was the root of all evil."

"Eva loved me—you she respected. Her father hated me, for some reason I could never divine; while, on the contrary, he fairly worshipped you, and determined that Eva should become your wife."

"A coldness sprung up between us on Eva's account; that you treated me insultingly, you cannot deny; that I returned fire for fire, I will not deny."

"Finally, you declared me no longer a member of your band, and bade me clear out. It stung me to madness. I was ready for anything; the devil was at hand to take advantage of my condition."

"His agent, Siaso Dreka, the new member, came to me and told me he had a band of outlaws close by, and they were going to attack Leigh's cabin; if I would join, Eva should be mine. I jumped at the chance."

"The attack was made. I got Eva away in safety; the outlaws got the gold, and murdered Jacob Leigh. I fled with Eva down into Kansas, and there we were married."

"But the fates were against me. My little wife died, and I was left alone—a fugitive from justice; for you had set the hounds of the law upon my track, telling them I was the murderer of Jacob Leigh. Soon after this, I met Siaso Dreka, in Zossel. Here I found that he was not Dreka at all, but Alf Nesmit, the son of a leading citizen."

"He told me of an enormous project he had in view, and under penalty of being delivered up to justice as a murderer—for he had evidence all against me—I was compelled to promise to join his future band—ay, to swear it, as I hoped to be saved from the fiery pit of hell."

"I was then permitted to go free, till the project was in working order, but I was conscious of being constantly watched by the spies of my evil genius."

"I roamed around for years—here, there and everywhere. I was like a wild man half of the time. At last I entered the service of *Alcalde* Murrillo, as a confidential servant, and I learned many secrets of his black life—one of which relates to Miss Bulard, here—and in the bargain fell desperately in love with Inez, who is here beside me, my promised bride."

"When the Vulture band was thoroughly organized, I was captured, taken to their retreat, and again forced to swear an oath—a horrible oath, of ten years' servitude in the interests of the order. Fortunately, I did the terrible commander a valuable service a short time ago, and he declared my sworn ten years of servitude should expire two months hence. When that time arrived, had I stayed in the valley, I would doubtless have been compelled to repeat the oath. But I did not stay; I longed for freedom."

"After the attack was made on Los Des Pumas, and Inez and Nola were brought to our retreat, I resolved to escape, and take them and Miss Bulard with me."

"You know nearly all the rest. Cloven-Hoof had sent couriers from the valley to the Indians, offering for sale the maidens, and requesting a visit. I knew of this; I slipped from the valley, waylaid an Apache chief, donned his garb, bought you away from the Arapahoes, and now I've set you free."

"I am done, sir. You have listened to the truth, and nothing but the truth. Here are my pistols, Kit. I am a traitor, as you say, but not a murderer. Shoot me, if you like; I'll offer no resistance."

Captain Chris sprang forward—sprung forward not to touch the extended weapons, but to clasp the other hand of his former mate, and shake it heartily.

"I believe you, Phil; old boy; I believe you!" he said, huskily, the tears standing in his eyes. "We were both wrong, then, Phil; I for treating you like a dog; you for betraying your trust, and putting the stain of suspected crime upon your name. We were both wrong. Poor Eva! It is perhaps well you took her from me. I find, since meeting my darling Guessie, here, that I never before knew what it was to really love. Forgive me, old boy, as I freely do forgive you, and let us once more be brothers, as of old!"

The next instant the two men were locked in each other's embrace, and they wept tears of joy and gratitude.

Many, then, were the scenes that were rehearsed of olden times, and the congratulations offered. In fact, the morning had well advanced, and the meat done to a crisp, ere a thought was entertained of eating, so great was the joy in the little camp.

Pretty Guessie and Inez were supremely happy in the society of their stalwart ranger lovers, and Nola

would have been, hinted Inez, had Lieutenant Weslyn, of Fort Griffin, been present.

At last the morning meal was dispatched, and then Warren declared it the best plan to go directly back over the course they had come, for at least a mile; then strike across to the water-course, and pursue it southward, until the rangers' camp was reached.

Captain Chris agreeing, the whole party mounted, and were about to dash gayly off, when Nola descried a horseman spurring down toward them from the north-east.

The little band waited, and soon an officer of the lieutenant's rank galloped up. He proved to be the betrothed of Nola, jolly Tom Weslyn, all the way over from Griffin, to visit his darling, whom he was calculating to seek out, *Los Des Pumas*.

Thus the cavalcade was made complete, and right merrily they dashed off over the prairies; the ringing laughter, now and then, as they galloped along, denoted better than words could express that all were elated in spirits.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE DEATH CONFESSION—STRAFE DISCLOSURES.

In the little mountain-locked valley, the rangers beheld a strange and startling sight.

Bodies of slain and scalped outlaws were strewn about over the level, and the earth was literally soaked with human blood. Here and there lay a Navajoe warrior, where he had fallen, at the hands of the enemy.

Savage-faced and grim were full three-score of Stinging Wasp's band, drawn up in military line on one side of the valley, their belts loaded with reeking scalps; their whole demeanor indicative of triumph and victory.

Under guard, in front of the Indians' lances, cowered the frightful Demon-Buffalo and his spectral Spirit Jurors.

They had been surprised and captured, uninjured.

"Have ye smothered 'em all?" asked the Leopard, "save them prisoners, yander?"

"Ugh! yes. Navajoe got heap many scalp. Lose only fifteen braves. Wagh! let the rangers come. Stinging Wasp will show 'em round."

Then followed a thorough inspection of the outlaws' stronghold.

It was found that there were numerous caverns and chambers in the soft limestone mountain sides, besides the council-room and the apartment beneath it, all of which were in most constant use by the illicit distillers. Their capacity for producing illegal whisky was found to be something immense.

Large quantities of the requisite machinery and apparatus for manufacturing the liquor were found, and it was discovered that a perfectly-working distillery had been running for months in the hills, while the country was being excited to a high pitch of superstition, over the doings of Cloven-Hoof and his Vultures, who, when questioned, acknowledged that their raids throughout the settlements were merely *bluffs*, to keep the settlers from divining the real intentions and operations of the brotherhood.

All the upper settlements, within a radius of fifty miles, were kept constantly supplied; and the revenue taxes were saved by the Order, to say nothing of the great profit realized from the whisky itself.

Several thousand dollars were unearthed from the floor of the court-chamber, at the suggestion of Little Ferret, and when the rangers had ascertained all that remained to be known, it was proposed to return to the camp, on the lake shore.

As the Dutchman understood managing the flat-boat, the prisoners were loaded in it, and started off down the channel, under a strong guard of Navajoes, while Stinging Wasp, and the rest of his band, together with Life and the rangers, brought up the rear.

Camp was reached in due time, and Colonel Nesmit and Jerrold were apprised of the raid into the Vulture stronghold, and of the discoveries made there.

The former was considerably interested, as he was in the service of the Government, and noted down all facts deemed worthy of notice, in a report he intended to submit to the higher authorities.

As it was growing dark, it was resolved that nothing should be done with the captives until the following day, when they would be duly tried and treated to the full code of border justice.

They were, consequently, placed under a strict guard of Navajoe braves, and preparations for the night were made.

On consulting with Colonel Nesmit, the Leopard decided to turn over the illicit whisky to Stinging Wasp, for his share of the spoils, while the rangers kept the gold as their booty.

The liquor was received with many thanks by the old chief, and he proceeded at once to deal it out with a liberal hand to his warriors. As a natural consequence, they got ingloriously drunk in celebration of their recent victory.

The night passed away, and in the morning arrangements were made for the trial of the captives. But, before the hour arrived for said trial, considerable excitement was created by the awakening of the *alcalde*, Conales Murrillo, who clamorously demanded that all the camp should assemble around his death-couch, as he had a confession to make to which he wanted all to bear witness.

This request was of course obeyed, and the rangers and Indians alike, drew respectfully near; for when standing, as it were, in the presence of the grim monster, Death, they, as of one accord, felt somewhat awed and impressed.

The dying man was lying on a bunk of leaves and moss, near the lake shore, which the skillful hands of Peggy Bulard had fashioned out for him, and he was very white and ghastly in appearance. Plainly on his brow was stamped the signet of death.

He appeared to be in full possession of his mind and senses, and when the crowd had assembled close by he turned to the artist, Jerrold, who was kneeling by his side.

"Arthur Trevor," he spoke, in husky tones, while the tears came to his eyes, "I am dying—dying, and with my soul burdened with crime. I know not how I will be received in the next world; I dare not think of it. For hours I have been conscious, though it was unknown to you, during which time the good and bad of my nature have been each struggling for the mastery. Thank the Lord, the good has triumphed, and I shall make to you disclosures of my past life, cost what it may.

"Listen to me, Arthur Trevor, and you, Colonel Nesmit; listen, and remember each word that interests you; for my moments on earth are numbered, and I shall speak direct to the point.

"I will go back, Arthur Trevor, to those long ago days, when we were young college chums at Harvard—true and inseparable friends, devoted students, and wild, harum-scarum fellows, the pet of the ladies, and the pride of our class. Those were happy days, Trevor—perhaps the happiest days that either you or I have ever spent.

"I will commence with the time when we both loved a beautiful belle of our set—an accomplished, pure-hearted and winning maiden, whom all loved—whom we worshipped.

"She was a prize, was Alleen Le Clercq, and you won her—won her fairly. I afterward found, but at the time I was mad over my defeat, and believed you to be guilty of all imaginable crimes; cursed you and her; cursed my own friends and my God, all alike, in my insane fury.

"Then and there I began to wade deeply into crime and wickedness. I was utterly regardless as to what stain I put onto my hitherto good name; I sought and found solace in debauchery, and associated with characters of the lowest stamp.

"I was only in moderate circumstances, and, very naturally, I longed for riches. Had I been a millionaire-prospective, like yourself, Arthur Trevor, I, instead of you, would have won the hand of Alleen Le Clercq in marriage.

"As it was, I was a beggar; you won her, and I swore I'd have revenge. You married her, and two lovely little twin children were born you—a boy and a girl, and both the picture of their angel of a mother. Oh! how proud were you of these tiny darlings, and how devotedly you watched over them! But, you were destined to lose them—to lose all you held dear to you, and that, too, through my wickedness."

The artist groaned.

"At the time I arrived at this determination, I was stopping at a small squatters' settlement on the Missouri river. One black and stormy night, I quitted the place and rode southward in search of some spot where I could drop the twins and rid myself forever of them, and at the same time put them beyond your reach.

"I found a suitable hiding-place after hours of riding—a lonely old swamp, on the river-bottom, near which stood a deserted cabin. I tied rocks to the clothing of the male child, and drowned it in a pool of still, clear water. The piercing shrieks of the little thing are yet ringing in my ears. I grew nervous, hurried the other child into the water, and fled, heartily glad that the job was done with. I came immediately to Texas, and wedded a Mexican woman of wealth.

"She was the daughter of an old Spanish *alcade*, and it proved a fortunate match for me. Two children were born us; one a dark-eyed little girl, the image of its mother; the other a genuine counterpart of the old Spanish don. I hated the young imp, from the moment my eyes rested upon it, and resolved, rather than to rear it with such a feeling, to dispose of it.

"Yes," resumed the culprit, "through my wickedness I obtained a sweet revenge, when you least expected me.

"One day, I sent you a telegram from a distant town, purporting to come from a relative of yours, and requesting your presence immediately, as your cousin was dying. You flew off on your mission. I was at hand, and of course called upon your wife. She at first received me cordially, but when I proposed that she should fly with me, to some distant land, she treated me as a vile thing to be spurned from her path.

"I grew enraged, and in a moment of terrible fury, I killed her—ay, killed her, Arthur Trevor, and when you returned from your wild-goose chase you found your loving wife a corpse, and your twin babes gone!

"Probably it was the most cruel blow I could have dealt you. Anyhow, it satisfied my truly insane hunger for vengeance.

"I fled; you pursued. I roamed from point to point; you, like an avenging Nemesis, followed in my wake. At last you approached so near upon my trail, and the babes were such an incumbrance, that I resolved to rid myself of them, and thereby facilitate my chances of escaping your vengeance.

"The chance soon came.

"Having nothing except my wife to attract me to Los Des Pumas, I traveled about the country for a time, and during said time, I met with you, Alonzo Nesmit.

"We went into a speculation and made a deal of money, all of which I finally decamped with—also taking with me your little fair-haired daughter, Inez. In return, I sent you my hated son with my best respects. Whether you sought me or not, I do not care to know. Enough it is to say you would probably never have found me, had it not been for the wild race of three days ago!"

"And my children?" eagerly questioned Arthur Trevor, bending forward.

"And my daughter?" echoed Col. Nesmit, anxiously.

A sickly smile lit up the visage of Conales Murrillo.

"Your daughter, Nesmit," he replied, "is living, and was borne off a prisoner by the Vultures at the time of the attack on Los Des Pumas, together with my own daughter, Nola. If you find them, will you care for her as I have kindly cared for your child?"

"I will," replied the colonel, tears filling his eyes. "If God allows me to find them, I will treat your child as my own!"

"May Heaven bless you!" sighed Murrillo.

"But, what of my children?" cried the artist, impatiently; "you have not told me of them!"

"True! I have not, because I would spare you more pain," was the reply. "They are both dead!"

Arthur Trevor drew a long sheath-knife from in under his clothing, a determined fire gleaming in his eyes.

"Then you shall die, as did my poor, beautiful wife and children," he exclaimed, fiercely, and he leaped forward to do the terrible work.

"Hold! hold, thar!" shouted old Jack Burlard, excitedly; "don't kill him yit! Jes' hold on er bit, till I ex-platinate!"

Then, with his wife on his arm, he drew near, and in his rough, homely manner of speech, related the occurrence of seventeen years before; all about the finding of the babes in the swamp; how the female had been reared by them to womanhood; how they had found a singular birth-mark on the dead infant, and the magnificent locket on the little girl.

Arthur Trevor put up his knife.

"And this female child is living?" he demanded joyfully.

"Ay!" cried a voice, back of the crowd, where a little party of horsemen and women had all the while been attentive listeners—"and here she is—here are all of us!"

Then, when Captain Chris and Gussie, Phil Warren and Inez, and Lieutenant Weslyn and Nola rode out into the scene, the surprises were complete.

The rangers sprung to greet their captain; Mr. Trevor received his long-lost daughter with open arms, and Col. Nesmit caught pretty Inez to his breast, while Nola Murrillo tearfully knelt beside the dying *alcade*, who she had never known really was her father, he having given her and Inez to understand that he was simply their guardian, or foster-father.

Long and rapturous were the greetings, and well they might be, for even in the presence of death, all the whites assembled on the shores of that lone little lake, felt in their hearts the true gratitude and joy of a happy reunion.

When quiet was restored, and the thoughts of the rangers once more reverted to their prisoners, the startling discovery was made that they had made their escape, the Navajoe guards having thoughtlessly left them alone, at the time the camp had been summoned to the death-scene of the repentant dying *alcade*.

Near where they had stood, lying upon the ground, was the explanation of the mystery of the Demon Buffalo, or Cloven-Hoof.

It was a buffalo's head, dextrously hollowed out, so as to fit down over the head of an ordinary person, a long, thick and sweeping mane of hair serving to conceal the connection at the neck. By the side of this lay a pair of spangled pants, and a pair of shoes, the latter being manufactured out of painted leather, and closely resembling the hoofs of a buffalo, being cloven, and fringed with hair.

So much for the ingenuity of a bad man for a bad purpose.

Instantly the alarm was spread, and a posse of mounted rangers headed by Captain Chris, the Leopard, and Colonel Nesmit, started in pursuit. The trail was soon found, and in a few moments, the cavalcade came upon a man lying face downward in the grass. He was recognized by Colonel Nesmit as Alf, the son of *alcade* Murrillo, and by Adams, as the counterpart of the portrait in the Nesmit hacienda.

He was almost dead, having fallen in his attempt to escape, and run a lance he had stolen through his body.

He revealed enough, however, to satisfy the rangers that it would be useless to pursue his companions, as they had scattered—never again to unite. Before he expired, he confessed that for years he had been associated with a band of the sharpest rogues he could find in Eastern cities, and that it was he who had personated the Cloven-Hoof, which had created such a sensation all along the border.

Alcalde Murrillo and his sinning son were both buried in one grave, on the banks of that picturesque little Texan lake.

The whole of the distilling apparatus, used by the Vultures, was destroyed, and Stinging Wasp moved into the little mountain-locked valley, where he still lives with his tribe, a peaceful and respected chief, in the full possession of all that can go to make a red-skin happy—freedom and plenty of whisky.

A week after the strange reunion on the lake shore, a merry little party set out across the plains toward the East.

They were a jolly company, and prominent among them, we might mention the Leopard and his rangers, Captain Chris Adams, and Miss Bulard, or Trevor, as she is now called, Philip Warren and Miss Nesmit, Lieutenant Weslyn and affianced, Mr. and Mrs. Jack Bulard, and two very happy elderly gentlemen, named, respectively, Nesmit and Trevor—formerly the eccentric Jonathan Jerrold, artist.

Also, in their midst rode the sturdy little German, Little Ferret.

The journey was made without incident worthy of mention, and at last the party brought up in Austin. Here, Warren and Weslyn linked their fates with those of Misses Nesmit and Murrillo, and an elegant wedding they had.

Captain Chris and his affianced, however, postponed their wedding a few months, on account of some legal affairs in which the handsome ranger became involved; then they too were wedded.

Like, the Leopard, is now in command of the "Invincibles."

THE END.

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